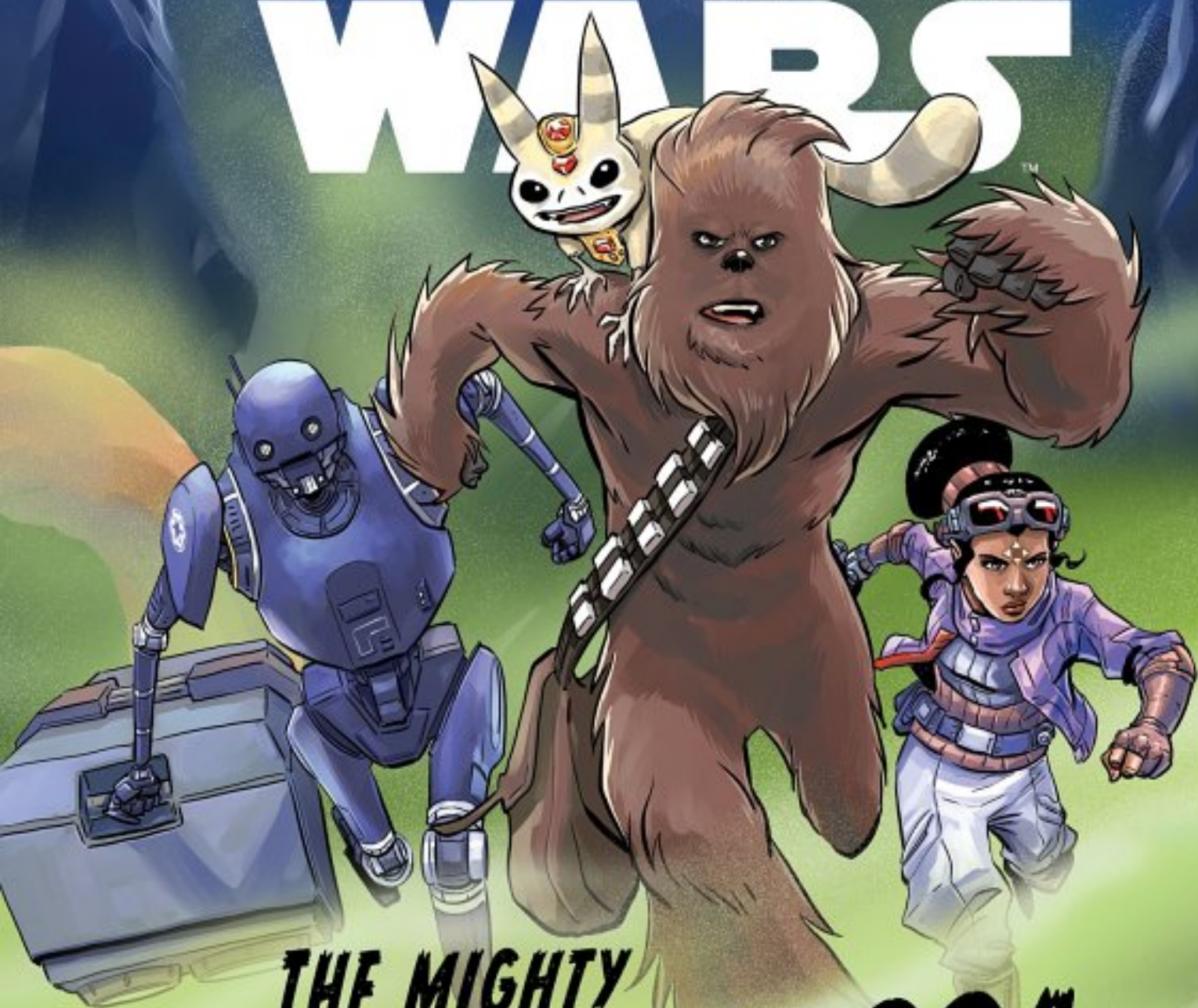


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TOM ANGLEBERGER

STAR WARS

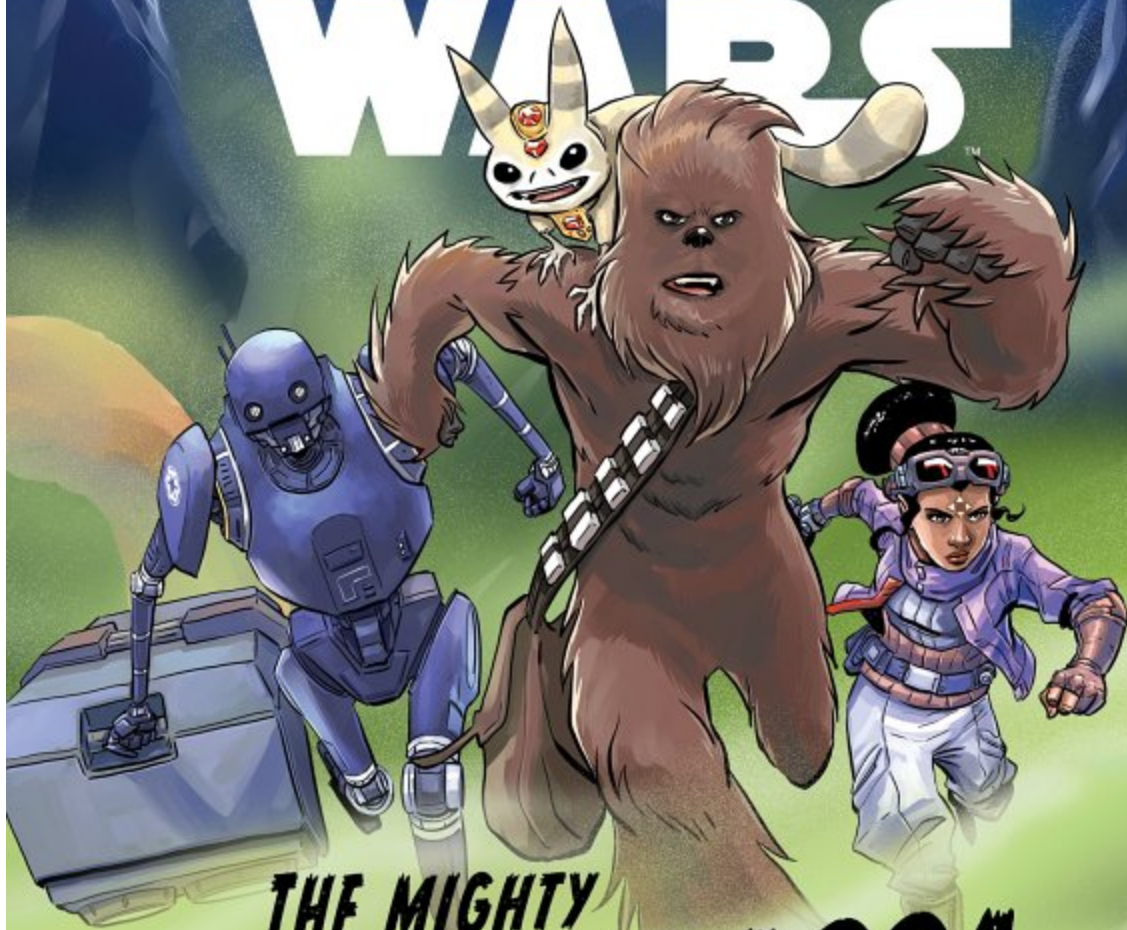


**THE MIGHTY
CHEWBACCA
IN THE FOREST OF FEAR!**

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STAR WARS



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STAR WARS™

THE MIGHTY **CHEWBACCA** **IN THE FOREST OF FEAR!**

WRITTEN BY
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ILLUSTRATED BY
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Los Angeles • New York

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About the Author

About the Illustrator

Dedicated to Roscoe Lee Browne,
the narrator of the “Story of *Star Wars*” tape
I played a million times as a kid.
For me it will always be his voice that says,
“A Long Time Ago....”



**A LONG TIME AGO
IN A GALAXY FAR, FAR AWAY....**

A Wookiee was sent on a pet-sitting job.

If you think the Wookiee was happy about this, then you don't know Wookiees. Especially not this one: Chewbacca, the infamous smuggler and copilot of the *Millennium Falcon*.

Chewbacca was, in fact, very angry about this job and at his partner, Han Solo, who had stayed behind with the pets' wealthy (and beautiful) owner, Alinka Aloo.

But the Wookiee was about to get a *lot* angrier. You may want to cover your ears.

CHAPTER 1



“WURGRRRRRRBLE!”

That was the sound of Chewbacca grumbling as he took off from Coruscant in a cargo ship full of cute tooka cats.

You know what a tooka cat is right? Sort of like a small, furry, hyper dragon but with big fuzzy ears, a chunky striped tail, and more teeth? A *lot* more teeth! Anyway, one of those was rubbing its body against Chewie’s leg while he was trying to fly the ship.

“Meeeyu?” (That was the tooka.)

“MRRRRRGGGGH!” (That was the Wookiee.)

There are many nuances and hidden meanings in the Wookiee language, Shyriiwook, but I believe he was complaining about the job in general and preparing to get more specific. I’ll do my best to translate, but it’s not my native language.

“NWURRRG!”

That was his opinion of the cargo ship, which was indeed pretty cruddy.

“URRRRRGG!”

And that was his opinion of the cargo ship’s controls. Also cruddy.

“WGHYAARRRR!”

As you can see, he was becoming increasingly frustrated with the controls.

“NYARRR RYARRR WHRRRG!”

Oh dear, I hope none of you do know Shyriiwook, because that was quite rude. However, he made a valid point: the controls weren't just bad; they were not working at all.

BAM! BAM! BAM!

That, of course, was not Chewie speaking but Chewie's massive hairy fist pounding dents into the control panel. The tooka scampered out of the cockpit when the banging started, which was a smart move. If you ever see a Wookiee losing his or her temper, you are in the wrong place and need to get to the right place, which is a long way away. Scamper if you must.

“YHWARGGHHHHHHHHHH!”

Now that was indeed an extremely angry roar, but I have to warn you the next one is going to be a lot louder. Because, you see, this pet-sitting job was just supposed to be a local, in-system shuttle run. There was absolutely no need for the hyperdrive to kick in and fling the cruddy cargo ship across the galaxy at lightspeed.

But that's exactly what happened.

FWOOOOOOOOOOOSH HHHH!

“MRAWWWWWWGGGGGGGGGGGGHHHHHHHHRRRRRAWWWWWWWWW!”

I'm sure that needs no translation.

Even as the echoes of his howl of rage bounced around the cockpit, Chewbacca began trying to rip the navicomputer loose, probably with plans of stomping it to pieces.

“Please don't rip that loose.”

Chewie leapt from the pilot's seat and whirled around in one surprisingly quick movement. He saw just on the other side of the hatch the ship's only passenger, the tooka cats' keeper, a human named Mayv Trillick.

Chewie had met Mayv briefly before they boarded the cruddy ship. He'd thought she seemed pretty short, even for a young human. He'd also noticed the line of gold triangles painted across her forehead, because honestly, they were hard not to notice.

But he barely noticed them now, being much more interested in smashing something.

The girl shrank back, worried that she might be the something that got smashed. But she continued: "I read a book once where someone busted the navicomputer during a hyperspace trip and the whole crew got marooned on a dead star."

"MNRUFFFF!" Chewie begrudgingly admitted that ripping the navicomputer apart was a bad idea, so he contented himself with angrily flipping switches and mashing buttons as he tried to figure out where the ship was taking them.

"I, uh, know where we're going, if that's what you're trying to figure out," the girl said. "It's some planet I'd never heard of in a system I'd never heard of. Ushruu, I think. I'm not sure how to pronounce—"

"MHHHRUNG?" This wasn't just a question; it was a very suspicious question. And an angry one. Chewie wanted to know why the tooka keeper knew more about where the ship was going than he did. And if he didn't like the answer, then he was going to get a lot angrier.

Mayv stepped back and kept one finger near the button that would shut the hatchway door between them. She didn't need to speak Shyriiwook to know the Wookiee was angry.

But she had known she'd need to explain herself eventually, so she had a little speech prepared.

"The first thing you should know," she said, "is that you've been double-crossed, but *not* by me."

"HURRGGGRRR."

"Uh, right, *not...by...me*. But just to go ahead and be honest: I'm not really the tooka cats' keeper. I'm a bounty hunter. Mayvlin Trillick. They call me Mayv. Heard of me?"

"MMNHH..." Chewie hadn't heard of her, and he wasn't sure if he believed her. She didn't seem like a cat keeper *or* a bounty hunter to him. Probably just another Coruscant underworlder—trying to act tough but barely living better than a stray tooka. There were millions of them on Coruscant's lower levels, and it never paid to trust any of them.

"And your friend called you Chewie, is that right?"

"HURFFF," Chewie answered impatiently.

"Okay, Chewie, the second thing you should know is that this isn't really a pet-sitting job. The whole thing was a trick. But like I said: not by me!"

"MHHGRRRRRR..."

"Right, and keep that in mind when I tell you the third thing....Your friend is now the prisoner, not the guest, of that rich princess."

"WHRRRG?" Mayv had expected more outraged roaring, but Chewie wasn't that surprised. He'd known something was up, but Han had been too distracted by Alinka's flirtations. And now, as usual, there was going to be a price to pay.

Chewie cocked his head and listened carefully. With Han trapped, it was going to be up to him to figure out how to get out of this one.

"That's right," Mayv continued. "They needed you to go on an insanely dangerous and morally dubious mission, and

they figured the best way to get your cooperation would be to hold him hostage. Were they right?"

"MHHHGG..."

"They tricked me the same way. Well, pretty close to it. Basically, we'll both have to work together to finish this job or your friend is dead. And probably us, too."

"WHUGGGG..." Chewie wasn't the least bit surprised by that, either.

"All right, as long as you don't bust up the controls anymore, the ship will get us where we need to go. At some point, Alinka is going to tell us what the *real* job is. Right now I better go check on those cats. It sounds like they're terrorizing the cargo droid again."

The mighty Wookiee sank back into the pilot's seat.

"MWWRRRGHGHGHGHGH..."

This was not a howl of anger or even a grumble. This was more of a satisfied grunt. Maybe even a chuckle?

Like I said, Shyriiwook is awfully hard to translate precisely, but the meaning is clear: Chewie was glad this wasn't going to be just a pet-sitting run after all.

CHAPTER 2



The trick was a clever one.

Han and Chewie had been hanging around Urrett's Marque, which was one of the rougher bars on 1329, which was one of the rougher levels of Coruscant's underworld, which was the roughest anywhere.

The two smugglers had docked the *Millennium Falcon* on Coruscant a week earlier to drop off some (illegal) cargo. They had been hoping to pick up a small job or two before they left.

But what they got was one very small job that looked like it would earn so much that they wouldn't need any other jobs for a while.

A beautiful extremely pale woman—trailed by a team of ugly blue-skinned bodyguards—had approached them, asked a few questions, and then handed Han a metal card. The address burned into it looked like a misprint.

Han's eyebrows rose in spite of his desire to play it cool. "I didn't know anybody lived that high up." The higher up on Coruscant you lived, the better off you were. This address was *really* high up.

"'Anybody' doesn't," the woman said. "I'm not 'anybody.' I'm Alinka Aloo. That's right: Sim Aloo's daughter. Come to this address tonight...and don't forget the card or the guards will kill you before you can knock."

She winked, the bodyguards glared, and then they all left.

"WHHHRRRF!"

“Don’t worry, Chewie, I’ll check it out before we go. I see our old friend Sarlee Jax over there. Let me see what she knows about Aloo.”

Chewie ordered some fried nerf nuggets. If Han got them mixed up in something, he might not get another good meal for a while.

“Ugh,” said Han as he slid back into his seat. “How can you eat those things?”

“HYROOMPH!”

“Well, knock yourself out then, ’cause I think we’re going to be busy. I’ve got a good feeling about this one, pal. Sarlee told me all about the Aloo family. The father, Sim Aloo, is someone really big in the government. And not the local government. He’s like the Imperial whizbag or something. The one we just met, the daughter, runs the family business when he’s busy.”

“MLURRG?”

“Well, no, I didn’t find out what the business is. But trust me, these people are rich in the galactic sense of the word.”

“WHHHHARG MRYURRRR?”

“Well, yes, now that you mention it, she is attractive, but don’t worry....After what happened on Elgamor 5, I’m keeping this strictly business.”

“HRMMMMPH!”

Han beamed. “Hey, I can’t help it if my natural charm always shines through.”

CHAPTER 3



The guards stationed in front of Alinka Aloo's tower were much more interested in the metal card Alinka had given Han than in his natural charm. It got him and Chewie in the front door and through two more security checkpoints—including a weapons check, where Han and Chewie very reluctantly left their blasters.

"MLURPHHH."

"Of course it's not a trap. Or at least, I don't think it is. People this rich don't need traps! Just relax...."

"MLURRRRPH..."

At last, an elevator took them high into Alinka Aloo's towering residence. Yes, the young lady really was Sim Aloo's daughter. She hadn't been lying about that...just everything else.

The elevator doors opened onto the most lavishly decorated room Han had ever seen. It was like an art museum had been cleaned out and all the stuff had been packed into one room.

Everything had probably once been priceless on some planet or another, but here it was just one more rug or picture or lamp or weird-looking statue-type thing that glowed and played music if you waved your hand near it.

A while back, Han and Chewie had been paid a small fortune to smuggle a Junarian vase off of Chandrila for Gorga the Hutt. Alinka Aloo had three of these ornate vases. They

had been shoved to the end of a table as if she was bored with them and had wanted to make room for something new.

"Oh, Captain Solo," called Alinka from some sort of floating sofa draped in lush purple tapestries. "It's so nice of you to come here to see me. I hate having private conversations in front of my bodyguards."

"Well, I—"

"Now, I want you to peek out the window there at the landing pad. Do you see that little ship?"

"Yes, it looks like a—"

"Oh, I don't know a thing about it. Father loaned it to me. Could your furry man fly it?"

"You mean Chewbacca? Of course, he can—"

"Oh, wonderful. I just need him to fly it over to Centax 3."

"Centax 3? You mean one of the moons?"

"Right, we have a place there. How much would something like that cost? Ten thousand? Twenty thousand? You'll have to tell me. I've never done anything like this before."

Again, Han tried to play it cool. But seriously, it's not easy to play it cool when someone offers you twenty thousand credits for a five-hundred credit job that you probably would have done for two hundred fifty because you're desperate.

"What do you think, Chewie? Twenty should cover it? Maybe twenty-five if there's trouble." Chewie's eyes widened as he heard Han naming such a ridiculous amount, but he knew how to play it cool, too, so he just grunted.

"Oh, there won't be any trouble," said Alinka. "It seems like the simplest thing in the world, and I was about to do it myself, but Father didn't want me to just because it's very slightly illegal!"

Aha, thought Han, *now we're finally getting to the truth*. But of course, we weren't.

"What exactly is the cargo?"

"It's my tooka cats! You've heard of code three-one-something? It's some new rule that says you can't have

took a cats on Coruscant anymore! Apparently, there are millions of them running around down there in the city. But why shouldn't I have them up here in my tower?"

"Well, I—"

"Anyway, Father thinks it's best if we send them away for a little while, poor things. And he thinks we should do it quietly and without exactly telling the spaceport people what we're doing. But you know all about that, right? That's why I'm hiring you!"

"Oh, yes, I'm sure we—"

"Wonderful! Mayv! Mayv!"

Han wasn't sure what "Mayv" meant, but then a young human appeared from the next room. She looked a bit scruffy, Han thought. Of course, Han looked pretty scruffy, too, especially surrounded by all of Alinka's luxuries.

"Mayv is my perfectly wonderful tooka keeper!" said Alinka.

Mayv was, in fact, carrying a golden tooka cat, but she wasn't all that wonderful at keeping it. The toothy creature was squirming, scratching, and making a sound not unlike that of a grumpy Wookiee.

Han and Chewie had seen countless tooka cats in backstreets and alleys on many planets. But they had never seen one wearing a jewel-encrusted collar and headpiece before.

As soon as it saw Chewie, the tooka cat wriggled out of Mayv's arms, bounded across the room—breaking several irreplaceable treasures—and leapt into his arms, purring and rubbing its ear against him.

"MMMLRFFFFF," complained Chewie.

"Yeah, but...twenty thousand credits, pal," whispered Han.

"Oh, good! It likes you already!" said Alinka. "That will make everything so much nicer! Now, Mayv, go ahead and put it on the ship. Are the others already loaded up?"

"Yes, Your Highness," said Mayv, trying to remove the creature from Chewbacca.

"Your Highness'?" repeated Han.

"Oh, don't worry, Captain Solo, you needn't call me that," tittered Alinka. "It's so embarrassing, really. And I can't have you calling me 'Your Highness' all evening."

"All evening'?"

"You wouldn't mind staying here to keep me company would you? Your friend will only be gone a couple of hours, but I'll be so lonely without my tookas...."

"Well, I—"

"Wonderful!" she chirped, patting the space next to her on the floating sofa. "You can tell me all about your spaceships, and maybe I can think of some other jobs you can do...or maybe we'll do something else entirely, Captain Solo."

"You, uh, can call me Han," he said, giving her that smile that Chewie knew would only lead to trouble.

"Now, Han, you just sit here and enjoy some of Father's wine while I have a quick word with my cat keeper."

Alinka hopped off the sofa and grabbed a little book from a table as she walked over to Mayv.

"Look, Mayv, we found that book you were interested in."

"Yes! That's it!" said Mayv excitedly, letting go of the tooka to reach for the book. In a flash, the tooka was scrambling back up Chewbacca again, this time perching on the Wookiee's shoulders and turning to hiss at its keeper.

"Perhaps I'd better hold on to the book for now," said Alinka, "for safekeeping...until you get back."

"I'm sure that's not necessary, Your Highness."

"I'm sure it is."

The dark looks that passed between the two young women would have tipped off Han and Chewie that something was wrong. But Han and Chewie were busy having their own argument.

“MWGGRRRRR GRRRRNGH!”

“What do you mean you don’t like the job?” whispered Han. “It’s twenty thousand credits. You’ll be back in no time, and we’ll be spending this money for years!”

“MWGGRRR MYURRR!”

“Nobody says you have to like the cats!”

“MWGGRRRRR RRRROKSHHH!”

“Nobody says you have to like the keeper.”

“MWGGHHRRRR WHUUUG!”

“Keep it down! We keep things nice and friendly and we may get more jobs like this. That’s why I’m staying...to keep things nice and friendly.” ***“RILLGGG!”***

“Yes, I know I said strictly business. This will be, you know...nice, friendly business.”

“WLURF!”

“Would you relax? If anything happens, I’ll come get you in the *Falcon*. But what could go wrong? It’s just a pet-sitting job.”

CHAPTER 4



Well, we've already established that it wasn't really a pet-sitting job and that the tooka cats were all part of the trick.

But they were also part of the problem. A noisy problem.

Bumps, bangs, and screeches were coming from the cargo hold.

"MRRUFF," complained Chewie. Mayv went to investigate.

"The cargo has escaped from the cargo hold," reported K-2SB, a tall grumpy cargo droid. "Requesting permission to use deadly force."

"What?" yelled Mayv. "Deadly force on the tookas? No way! Don't use *any* force!"

"But I want to," replied the droid. After being stuck in cramped crates, a herd of tooka cats was now stampeding around and around the cargo hold, bouncing off the walls, the crates, the equipment, each other, and mostly, the droid. Every attempt the droid made to grab one of the creatures just seemed to make the whole pack angrier.

"Look, uh, what is your name again?" asked Mayv.

"I am class nine Imperial cargo droid Kay-Tuessbee," he replied. "To save you, the user, time, I have been programmed to respond to the call sign Kay-Tu."

"Okay, great, so, Kay-Tu, could you just—"

THWONK!

So many tookas had been jumping on the droid from so many different directions that he toppled to the floor and lay there wriggling his arms and legs helplessly. The whole pack

immediately piled on as if this was the greatest toy they'd ever had a chance to paw, claw, scratch, and gnaw.

"Repeating request to use deadly f—"

"YYYUURRRRRRUUNGGH!"

Chewie was standing in the hatchway roaring. A rough translation would be: "What the Hutt is going on in here and who do I have to whomp to make it stop?"

Everyone, even the tookas, froze.

There was a moment of near silence. The only sounds were a sensor beeping in the cockpit and the scuffle of Mayv's boots as she backed away from the enraged Wookiee. Trust me, you would have backed away, too.

Then a mighty purring began and the tooka cats dashed toward Chewie with big toothy grins. It was like a laser blast of furry, clumsy love, and it almost knocked the mighty Wookiee over.

Chewie'd had enough trouble with just the one cat earlier. Now the whole pack was trying to scramble up to his head at the same time, and they didn't hesitate to use their claws to do so. The golden one with the bejeweled collar had gotten to the top of Chewie's head and was hissing and snarling to protect its spot. Chewie could only look pleadingly at Mayv and groan piteously.

"I'd be laughing right now," said Mayv, "but I read in a book once that Wookiees don't always see the humor in certain situations."

"GWRRRHRR!" This meant that she was right.



“Thank you for your assistance,” said the cargo droid, springing back to his feet and zipping through a hatchway. “The problem with the cargo has been resolved.”

CHAPTER 5

Can you handle a big secret? I feel like I have to tell you now, because if I wait until later to tell you, you'll be mad that I didn't tell you sooner.

The cargo droid wasn't a cargo droid.

K-2SB was really...K-2SO.

Yes, *that* K-2SO: the Imperial droid that rebel spy Cassian Andor stole and reprogrammed. He wasn't a cargo droid at all but a deadly KX-model security droid. Extremely dangerous!

And not only was K-2SO a rebel spy, he was on a mission right then!

His mission was to help Cassian stop the work of Sim Aloo. The rebels believed Sim Aloo and his daughter had been collecting Sith artifacts from across the galaxy to help the Emperor, who liked to employ Sith as inquisitors and enforcers.

So Cassian sent K-2SO to Coruscant to work undercover as an Imperial security droid. That's why he was using the code name K-2SB.

You might not think that changing just one letter would make a very good code name, but the truth was that the Empire was so big and had so many droids it worked just fine.

When Cassian heard that the Aloos were up to something, he ordered K-2 to report for duty on the ship as a cargo droid. He guessed, rightly, that people like the Aloos didn't pay attention to droids as long as they did what they were told.

For K-2, the hard part about pretending to be a cargo droid was remembering to act stupid. Sometimes he forgot

to act stupid, then remembered and forced himself to do something extra stupid to make up for it. Like letting a bunch of tookas knock him over.

He didn't like acting stupid and even suffered the droid equivalent of embarrassment, but Cassian had programmed him to do *anything* for the Rebellion.

Anything.

For now, he simply extended an antenna and tuned in to the listening device he had planted in the cockpit earlier so he could listen in on what Chewie and Mayv were about to say.

CHAPTER 6



Mayv solved Chewie's tooka problem by opening several thermocans of tooka food.

The tookas were street cats that one of Alinka's servants had rounded up as props for tricking Han and Chewie. They had never eaten proper food in their lives.

Once the smell of roasted pik-pok fish reached them, they acted like excited pets in a holo vid commercial. As they swarmed around the food, Chewie and Mayv snuck back through the hatchway into the cockpit and closed the door. But one tooka, the golden one, slipped through to join them.

"Whew," said Mayv. "I am really, really glad that dealing with those cats isn't actually the mission."

"MRUGGHHH?"

"Are you asking what the mission actually is?"

"RUNF!"

"I've been wondering that, too. Alinka wouldn't tell me ahead of time. She said to call in once we were on our way. So..."

Mayv pulled a vidscroll from her tool belt. Chewie raised an eyebrow at the obsolete technology.

"It's old," explained Mayv, "but this one's never let me down. I've got a lot of stuff stored on here...."

She spread the vidscroll's two handgrips apart and a screen lit up between them. Tapping controls, she flipped through a few files and found the number she was looking

for. With a whir, the vidscroll rerolled itself, and with a clack, she returned it to the magnetic gripslot on her belt.

Mayv tapped the number into the ship's holovid, and after a short delay, a small and staticky green hologram of Alinka Aloo appeared in the cockpit.

"Lady Aloo? Mayv here. We're on our way and ready to hear what you want us to do."

An even more staticky voice came back from the planet they had just left.

"Wonderful!" answered Alinka. "You've got the Wookiee there with you?"

"HARRRRGRGHHHH!"

"I'll have to ask you not to yell," came the reply. "It might startle one of my bodyguards. I have about twenty of them in the room now...and they're all pointing their blasters at your little friend. Isn't that so, Captain Solo?"

"You were right about this one, pal," came Han's voice.

"MYURRRR!"

"I know! I know! But listen...she says she'll still pay for the job. She's got the creds sitting right here on the table."

"Of course I will!" said Alinka. "The money means nothing to me...but neither does your friend's life. If you bring back what I want, you get both. Fail and you get nothing but a blaster bolt. The same goes for you, girl."

"Okay, Your Highness," said Mayv. "We understand. Tell us what you want."

"The cargo droid has a chip with all the information we have about the planet Ushruu. It doesn't have people anymore. I think they all got eaten or something. It's mostly trees now, which is why we hired a Wookiee.

"Before the people got eaten," continued Alinka, as if people getting eaten was only a minor annoyance, "some of

them built a temple for their weird local religion. And my father learned that they left behind a book in this temple. Well, I say 'book' but we have no idea what it looks like. Could be a holocron, a droid's memory bank, or a data cylinder...but it was a primitive planet, so more likely it's something made out of a dead tree, like a book or a scroll."

"Wait," said Mayv, "you're sending us to look for something and you don't even know what it is exactly?"

"Correct. That's why we've got you, Mayv. You're a librarian, right?"

"Uh...bounty hunter *slash* librarian..."

"Right, whatever, so the chip has the coordinates for some kind of temple that a mining team found. Pretty sure that's where you're going to find it. Like I said, we don't know exactly what it is or how big it is, so we sent that cargo droid with you to carry it."

"I don't get it," said Mayv. "Why not send in a whole team of mercenaries to get what you want?"

"That was tried. They ran into...difficulties."

"What kind of difficulties? I mean, I think it would help us if we knew—"

"They were eaten," said Alinka with a dismissive wave of her hand.

"Oh, great..."

"GRRRRRUNPH!"

"Alinka, I've looked around the shuttle and haven't seen any weapons," said Mayv. "Where are they?"

"Well, I couldn't really give you weapons, could I? You might have done something silly, like try to use them on me."

"So you sent us out here with no weapons even though something *ate* the last people you sent?" exclaimed Mayv.

"I didn't say this would be an easy job! I wouldn't have gone to all this trouble to send a Wookiee if it was going to

be easy!”

“HRRRUMP!”

“Look, Chewie, don’t get yourself killed for this,” said Han, pushing his way into the hologram. “I can get myself out of—”

One of the bodyguards whacked Han on the head with the stock of his blaster, and Han slumped to the floor and out of the hologram.

“No,” said Alinka, “he can’t get himself out of here. Only you and the girl can do that! Understand?”

“MRRRUUGGHHHH!” yelled Chewie.

“Good. Good-bye.”

CHAPTER 7

You might expect Chewbacca to be furious, to go back to ripping the controls out of the wall—or at least to do a lot of bellowing, possibly at Mayv.

If your best friend were kidnapped and you had to go steal something from a dangerous planet to free him, you'd be freaking out. At least I would.

But Chewie and Han were pretty used to getting double-crossed. It was part of the job. I mean, how many nice, honest people hire smugglers? It does happen sometimes, but smugglers are much more likely to get hired by not-nice, not-honest crime lords.

Han in particular seemed to walk into traps more than most smugglers. What made Han a great smuggler was that he was so good at getting out of those traps.

Sometimes, Chewbacca had learned, it was better just to get it all out in the open early, rather than spend half the job worrying about when the double cross was going to happen.



Rather than a *RAWWWRRRR*, Chewie turned to Mayv and gave a questioning grunt.

“GRMFF?”

“I guess you’re wondering why I told you I was a bounty hunter but Alinka said I was a librarian.”

“YURF...”

“Well, I’m not really either, I guess, but I’m also kind of both. Do you want to hear my story? It looks like we’ve got time.”

Chewie swiveled the pilot’s seat around to face her. He stretched out his legs to get comfortable, and the golden tooka cat immediately pounced onto his lap. One tooka, he decided, wasn’t as bad as a whole pack, and he soon found himself scratching it between its fuzzy ear cones as they both listened to Mayv’s story. (K-2SO listened, too, of course.)

CHAPTER 8

You know, if you're in a hurry to get to the action, you can skip this.

Mayv's story is a big deal to her, but it's nothing new. You've heard it all before. Just another kid beaten down by the Empire, trying to survive and resist at the same time.

So if you want to skip ahead, all you need to know is that the Empire took everything from Mayv and she wanted one thing back more than anything—even more than her parents—she wanted that book Alinka had.

Of course, if you want to know why she wanted it so bad, then don't skip this part.



"I was born during the Dennig-Far," began Mayv. "That means 'false hope.' That's what my people, the Oktarians, call the time after the clone troopers left but before the stormtroopers arrived.

"Oktaro was a battleground during the Clone Wars. Imperial history books say it was just a skirmish, but I grew up in the rubble, and believe me, it was more than a skirmish to us.

"Separatist droid armies stomped through our cities, blasting and bombing. They seemed to have no purpose. Just to destroy things. Everything they could."

"MRRURM MRRURMM..." Chewbacca muttered sympathetically. Her story sounded a lot like what had happened to his home planet, Kashyyyk.

"We had an army of our own, of course," said Mayv, "but they were beaten quickly. There seemed to be an endless

supply of those robots, but not of us. Even when we stopped fighting back, the droids just kept marching and destroying.

"And then the Republic clone troopers came and destroyed the droid armies. They were heroes!

"And then they were gone. Off to fight the next 'skirmish.' That's when the Dennig-Far began. The time when hope drove all of my people to rebuild our world. Well, not all of them. Many were too angry to hope. They left Oktaro and never came back.

"But those that stayed succeeded. They *did* rebuild...not just towns and cities, but the ways and wisdom of the Oktarians as set down in our ancient and sacred book, the *Mola Oktaro*.

"My parents were part of this. Before the war, they had been librarians, but their library was bombed. During the Dennig-Far, they devoted their whole lives to rebuilding the central library in the capital city, New Tobura.

"By the time I was old enough to understand all this, it was easy to hope. There was no war, just hard work. I gladly joined my parents in sorting through debris and trash piles to find documents, books, music, artwork...anything that could be restored and preserved.

"These were carefully catalogued and stored in a new library so that all the Oktarians could share our history and culture, especially our most treasured book, the *Mola Oktaro*.

"And then, just three years ago, the stormtroopers came."

"MWARRRRGHH!" Chewie knew how the story would end, and he did not like it.

"Yes...troopers returned to Oktaro, but now they were with the Empire. We were told by Imperial diplomats that the troopers were there to protect us. And they looked a lot like the clone troopers who had protected us once before.

"So there were no battles. No war. They were welcomed. Some Oktarians even wanted to join the stormtroopers, but that wasn't allowed.

“So the time of false hope continued...but not for long. Our leaders were no longer in charge. Decisions were made by the Empire on a faraway planet—Coruscant—and those decisions all seemed to benefit the Empire but not us.

“They wouldn’t even call our planet by its name! To them Otkar was just Geethree-four-seven-seven!”

“GRUMMMMK,” growled Chewie, who remembered his own anger at hearing Imperials call his home planet a number as if Kashyyyk was just another item in their inventory.

“We Otkarians were forced to stop rebuilding our cities and start building Imperial bases and mining operations. My people were driven from the coastal areas where they had always lived into the deserts where the Empire wanted to dig. Thousands died pointlessly just because the Empire didn’t know or care how toxic the sand in Otkarian deserts is.

“When we tried to protest, we discovered that our right to protest was gone.”

“WUHHHHHHRRRRYYYOR!” moaned Chewbacca, who remembered when the same fate had befallen the Wookiees of Kashyyyk.

“So we tried to fight. There were battles, but we lost them all almost as soon as we started. There were stormtroopers and Imperial war machines everywhere.

“Unlike the Separatist droids, the stormtroopers did not just destroy whatever was closest. They had a strategy. They took things over instead.

“Our holonet stations began to broadcast only Imperial news.

“One day I went to school and found the teachers had been replaced with holovids showing only what the Empire wanted us to learn, which wasn’t much.

“And the museums and libraries were closed. Everywhere that our history was preserved was shut down, starting with the central library my parents had devoted so many years to

restoring. The only way to get any information was on our vidscrolls.

“Then all the vidscrolls stopped working. The Empire sold us new devices that let them control what we could see and read. Luckily, they overlooked a few obsolete models, like mine.”

She pulled the vidscroll back off her belt and spread it out. She tapped and clicked the cylinders until the screen showed pictures. Pictures of stormtroopers marching prisoners through the streets, shooting an unarmed Oktarian, using an AT-ST to blast holes in a building.

“HGRRRRRRRRRRRRGH!”

These scenes were all too familiar to Chewbacca. He had seen the same things on many planets, including his own.

“MRRROONNOG COGL MROOONG...” He stopped ranting when he remembered Mayv couldn’t understand him. But she had understood him well enough.

“The false hope was gone, and most Oktarians had no hope at all left. But not my parents. They had a plan. They were going to break into the central library and steal the most important books, then find some way to reproduce them and spread them so that the *Mola Oktaro* would again be available to everyone.

“I was terrified, watching my usually peaceful parents strap on weapons and slip out of the house in the middle of the night. I didn’t know if they’d ever come back.

“They did...empty-handed. Their plan to break into the library had worked, but there was nothing to steal. Everything was gone. My parents were able to learn that everything had been packed up and sent to Coruscant for ‘processing.’ The same thing had happened at other museums, libraries, and schools. Even the *Mola Oktaro* had been taken.

“My father began to make plans with some smugglers to sneak off-planet. To travel to Coruscant and rescue the *Mola Oktaro*. *Hmmph*...he had no idea what Coruscant is. How big, how heartless, how impossible.

“And he never found out. He and my mother were arrested. Not because of their plan, but just because the Empire needed workers to replace the ones dying in the desert. So I took my father’s place on the smuggler’s ship. I went to Coruscant to get our *Mola Oktaro* back.

“And I learned how big and heartless Coruscant is...but not impossible.

“In the black markets at the lowest levels of Coruscant, I found one of our books. Not the *Mola Oktaro* but an important book of ancient songs. I couldn’t afford it. So I stole it. I was almost caught, so I was more careful the next time. And the next time. And the next. And I became quite good at stealing things.

“But not good enough. Sim Aloo caught me. One of his guards, I mean. Aloo has warehouses full of books, artwork, jewelry, everything. Not just from Oktaro, from all over the galaxy. All that stuff in Alinka’s apartment? That’s just a sliver of it. The things that caught her eye.

“And that book she held up? That was the *Mola Oktaro* itself. My parents believed that book alone could restore hope to the Oktarians. And I believe it, too. I have to.

“I can’t save my parents—I really don’t think I’ll ever see them again—but I can try to save that book.

“And I’ll do anything to get it...even help Aloo steal from somewhere else.”

CHAPTER 9



Chewie could not tell her his own story...and how similar some parts of it were to hers. His planet caught up in the Clone Wars, then crushed under Imperial rule. His culture looted, his people captured, he himself imprisoned on the planet Mimban.

But like I said, Shyriiwook is a remarkable language. Even those who don't understand it can often understand it.

So when Mayv finished her story and the Wookiee let out a long string of howls and yowls, punctuated by shaken fists and bared teeth...Mayv knew that they were on the same side. He would help her and she would help him.

But first, Chewie proclaimed, he was going to get some rest. By the time Mayv figured out that was what he'd said, he was already dozing off, with the golden tooka cat contentedly purring away on his lap.

She couldn't believe he was able to sleep.

She needed to settle her brain down a little so she could think. So she did what any Oktarian would do: she repainted the triangles on her forehead.

She unclipped a small triangular tube from her tool belt. It had caps on both ends. She uncapped one end and used the spongy material inside to wipe off the old triangles.

The other end had a similar sponge, but it was soaked in golden paint. She pressed it against her forehead and stamped a series of the gold triangles, or treblixes, that all Oktarians wore.

There was no need for a mirror; she had been doing this several times a day since she could remember. When she

was finished, the triangles formed a circle with tips facing inward: the Oktarian symbol for quick thinking, which she thought might help her now.

If nothing else, the act had calmed her down. She was ready to go find the droid and see what information Alinka had given him.

“Why didn’t you tell us you had information about the mission?” she asked him as he handed over a data chip.

“You did not ask for information about the mission,” replied K-2.

“*Oktar Kleepus*,” she grumbled in Oktarian—and I am definitely *not* translating that.

She plugged the chip into her vidscroll, and some old Separatist mining reports popped up. Dull stuff, but Mayv started reading eagerly, glad to finally get some solid information about their destination.

The rest of the tooka cats, realizing that the excitement was over, fell into a sleepy heap.

And K-2 was busy transmitting everything he had heard back to the rebel base, where Cassian was waiting to hear it.

CHAPTER 10



“MRRRRUH?”

Chewie hated being woken up from a nap by getting bounced out of his chair because the ship was out of control.

“MYOWWR!”

Tookas hated getting bounced off of a cozy Wookiee lap for any reason.

“HGRYYYRR!”

That was a happy growl—yes, Wookiees can growl happily—because the ship had dropped out of hyperspace and the manual controls were working again. The ship was bouncing through the upper atmosphere of Ushruu, and Chewie had to scramble to get the sublight engines fired and the ship into a landing cycle.

Then he realized that he had no idea where to land.

“NHYRR MRRRABAKGH?” he bellowed over his shoulder.

Mayv came stumbling into the cockpit and shielded her eyes against the bright light shining through the viewport from the planet’s surface.

“Yeah, that looks like it!” she yelled. “Ushruu is basically one big blue forest. Although the forest won’t be anything like—”

“NHYRRRR?” Chewbacca insisted, waving one arm at the planet.

“Oh, you want to know where to land?”

“MRPH!”

“Try these coordinates,” she said, holding out her vidscroll and pointing to a string of numbers. “After reading through the reports, I agree with Alinka and think that’s probably our best—*whoa!*”

Mayv fell into the copilot’s chair as Chewie pulled the ship out of its dive and veered toward the site Mayv had chosen.

Meanwhile, there was a series of clanks, thuds, and yowls from the cargo hold, where K-2 and the tookas had also been thrown off balance.

“MYARRN WROONGLL!” Chewie called out, explaining that it wasn’t his fault, it was the cruddy ship.

Chewie missed the *Falcon*. And then, as they swooped low over the trees, he missed Kashyyyk.

CHAPTER 11

Listen, as far as these tall blue things go, I'm just going to call them trees. Obviously, they weren't like the trees on Kashyyyk or Endor or anywhere else.

But we don't know what the inhabitants of the planet called them, because they're all gone. And there's never been a proper scientific exploration of the planet, and even if there had been, the scientists just would have given the trees a long name like *mycolibrachiflorawumpus*, and it would be silly for me to call them that over and over again.

The cyborg mining scouts who found and explored the planet took one look at the things, saw that they were tall, had branches, and stuck out of the ground, and decided they were trees.

But you or I would have taken one look and called them fungus. There were no leaves. Each branch either split into more branches or ended in a sort of blobby cluster. And instead of bark, they had a tough skin that looked like it would ooze something nasty if cut open.

If you found a small one, you'd be careful not to step on it, because it would surely squish and stick to your shoe.

Other than being a little gross, they weren't all that exciting, really, and you wouldn't even notice them if they weren't hundreds of meters tall and covering the entire surface of the planet.

As for what to call them, fungus or trees—they looked enough like trees that they reminded Chewie of the wroshyr trees he grew up on. And he knew a lot more about trees than you or I do.

So: trees.

CHAPTER 12



“MURGHHHHH GRRBOKGH!”

That was Chewie’s version of one of Han’s favorite expressions: “I’ve got a bad feeling about this.”

And he did have a bad feeling. But no idea why.

He should have been happy. He was doing what he liked: flying around the galaxy, in control, nobody shooting at him, no spaceport controller barking orders about where to land.

And yet the closer they flew to the planet’s surface, the more nervous he got. Not about Han being held prisoner back on Coruscant. No, it was something on the planet that was bothering him.

It appeared to be bothering Mayv, too.

“You know what’s weird? I wasn’t scared about this job at all until we got here,” she said. “Now I’ve got this creepy feeling and we haven’t even seen anything scary.”

“GRAGGIT!” agreed Chewie, then he added, ***“MYEEERRRR,”*** and pointed at something far off to the right. Something spiky and black and huge.

“Yikes, that *does* look scary,” said Mayv. “Looks like one of the abandoned cities mentioned in the mining report. Can we veer off course to take a look?”

Chewie turned toward the black spikes, taking the ship in lower over the forest.

Apparently, the golden tooka—whom Mayv had named Goldie—had a bad feeling, too, because the lower the ship got, the more she tried to bury herself in Chewie’s fur.

“MHHYYUURNURR,” Chewie fussed, and made a vague attempt at shrugging the little animal off his shoulders.

The other tookas in the cargo hold were in an even worse state. They could be heard yowling, crashing around, and scratching wildly on the hatch.

K-2’s voice came over the comm: “Assistance requested in the cargo bay. The cargo has become extremely annoying.”

“MURBBBBBB!” Chewie answered, without bothering to use the comm, which expressed his feeling that the cargo droid was also becoming extremely annoying.

Chewie’s bad feeling was getting worse. His nervousness was growing into fear. Chewie wasn’t used to fear, and that made him more nervous.

“FWURRRGGG...”

He was getting that sensation that makes you suddenly look behind you.

He looked behind him. Just Mayv, staring out the window and shuddering. She was trying to act like a daring criminal, not a scared kid. But she couldn’t quite manage it. Chewie didn’t blame her; the planet was creepy.

The dead city was no exception.

It had been built in a clump of about twenty trees that were considerably taller than the rest of the forest. Hundreds of windows and doors were cut into the trunks, and the trees and branches had been carved into stairs, ramps, walkways, and roads.

The Wookiee world had many cities like that, albeit in much nicer trees. But there was another difference. Chewbacca saw it but couldn’t explain it to Mayv.

The doors and windows of this city were all cut into the stalks near the tops. The lower halves of the stalks were bare and smooth. The residents of this city had wanted to live as far above the ground as possible.

“This fits with what Alinka told us and what I read in those reports,” said Mayv. “The inhabitants of this planet have been dead for centuries. Pretty sad...”

She drifted off, probably thinking of her own planet—dying under the iron rule of the Empire.

“NARNARRRRGH!” Chewie wanted to get out of there. The place was bringing up bad memories for him, too. **“MHHRRUN BBBRRRUG?”**

“If you’re suggesting we move on, then I say yes,” replied Mayv. “I don’t think there’s anything to find down there anyway. Let’s get back on course for those coordinates again.”

“YGHARRR!” answered Chewie, gratefully steering away from the dead city and resetting the navicomputer.

CHAPTER 13



Along the way, they saw another presumably dead city but didn't veer off to investigate it.

They also heard so many more complaints from K-2 that Mayv opened the door and let the tookas crowd into the control room. She tried to comfort some of the cats, but only being close to Chewbacca seemed to satisfy them.

"BWURHHHRR!" he complained, but Mayv only laughed.

"Oh, come on, put the ship on autopilot and cuddle them a bit! I've read that it can be very calming to have a pet during stressful situations."

"VURRR NAGBIT!" grumbled Chewie, pointing out that one pet might be calming, but twenty was way too many. The purring alone was enough to drive a Wookiee mad.

"Enjoy yourself," said Mayv. "I'm going to poke around in the cargo hold and see if there's anything back there that might be useful to us. The reports mentioned some dangerous wildlife the mining scouts called snarlers and sniffers, and I'm not interested in leaving the ship unarmed."

"VLARRRR MUURRRGH RRGGGG LURRRR! BRRR-ANNN GOOOWWRRRGH!" replied Chewie, which loosely translates to, "Find a really big weapon for me," but sounds quite poetic in Shyriiwook.

CHAPTER 14



"Blech! That smell!" Mayv gasped when she got to the cargo hold. "Kay-Tu, can you clean up some of this cat mess for us?"

"No."

"What do you mean 'no'?"

"You do it."

"Are you malfunctioning? I asked you to clean up!"

K-2SO was about to say something very rude indeed when he remembered that he was supposed to be K-2SB, a cooperative cargo droid. But not *that* cooperative, he decided.

"I am not equipped or programmed to complete that request."

"You're telling me that you can't pick up a little tooka poop?"

"That is what I am telling you. Also, it is not a little. It is a *lot* of tooka...waste material."

Mayv glared at the droid, and he stared back at her with an irritatingly blank expression. He then watched as she opened a maintenance locker, dug out some cleaning supplies, and started to do the job herself.

While she was cleaning up, she made a mental inventory of anything on the ship that might be useful. There wasn't much.

In the maintenance locker, she found something that appealed to her...an exo-glove, meant to give crewmembers a much longer reach when working in tight spaces. It was basically a large metal glove with servomotors to strengthen

grip. If something was out of reach, it could extend forward and grab it. And as countless dockworkers in countless spaceports knew well, it packed a heck of a punch in a fight.

Sharing a ship with a Wookiee and a towering cargo droid was making Mayv feel pretty short. This would at least give her a longer reach.

She didn't find anything like a Wookiee weapon, but she did find a carton of ration sticks, which she was pretty sure Chewie would appreciate.

With all the creepy sensations and anxiety she was feeling, she decided to take the ship's medkit along, too. Ushruu just didn't seem safe.

The only other thing she saw that looked useful was a roll of cable, so she grabbed that, too, and then dumped everything into a crate.

"I suppose you're going to want me to carry that thing around," said K-2.

"What is your deal?" snapped Mayv. "Isn't your whole purpose to move stuff around?"

"I have been instructed to bring back valuable cargo, not move nonessential 'stuff' around."

"Well, first of all, we don't know what will or won't be essential. And second of all, it literally weighs nothing because it's an antigrav crate."

"And I suppose you're going to want me to carry it around?"

Mayv was about to launch into another lecture, but she decided just to say, "Yes, I want you to carry it around."

"Okay," said K-2.

"*GRRRRRR!*" That was Mayv, not Chewie, by the way. *This droid, thought Mayv, is not only very annoying but also very strange. Broken or deranged or glitched or something.*

And suddenly, it occurred to her that she was stuck on a strange planet with a malfunctioning droid, an easily enraged Wookiee, and a herd of small, unhousebroken furry dragons.

What she didn't know was that she was just minutes away from adding "pack of hungry snarlers" to that list.

CHAPTER 15



“MLARRRG!”

Mayv didn't know what that meant, but she could tell she was being called back to the cockpit.

She opened the door and was nearly knocked down by the herd of tookas that charged through to the cargo hold. They were so worked up now that even Chewie couldn't calm them. They just wanted off the ship!

Mayv closed the door behind them so she and Chewie could concentrate on whatever *mlarrrg* meant.

“MLARRRRRRRGGGH!” Chewie repeated, pointing at the planet's surface.

Mayv looked and then jerked her head away in horror. She had to force herself to look again.

It was a great crack in the planet's surface, probably twenty klicks long. From deep inside the rift came an awful green glow—more than just light, almost a mist, almost alive.

Although they couldn't properly discuss it, Chewie and Mayv were thinking the same thing.

The uneasy feeling they got as they neared the planet's surface was much stronger there...as if it was leaking out of the planet through the chasm.

And yet, what was it really? A crack in the ground and some green mist? There was nothing particularly scary about that.

True, there seemed to be some dark mass inside the mist, and that was pretty scary-looking. But Chewie and Han

frequently charged into places that looked much more dangerous without a plan or a second thought.

So what was it? What could scare even the mighty Chewbacca?

“RURHHHH WHRUT HHRNGK?” said Chewie, motioning with his hands that he wanted to turn the ship around and get out of there.

“I wish we could,” said Mayv. “But I’m certain that this is where we’re going to find what we were sent for.”

“WHHHHHUUUUUGGGGGGGGGGGG!”

CHAPTER 16



Like I said, it took a *lot* to frighten the mighty Chewbacca, but it would take a whole lot more than that to make him turn back, especially when Han needed him.

So he flew lower to look for a good landing spot. There wasn't one. The blue trees went right up to the edges of the chasm.

"RRRRUPPHA GRMMGRMM," he muttered, which meant he was going to circle around to look for a better place to land.

But Mayv didn't even hear him, because the tookas were in full panic mode—yowling, scrambling, scratching, freaking out.

She went back to the cargo hold to help K-2 calm them down. But K-2 wasn't trying to calm them down. Instead, he had one hand on the cargo door release lever.

"What are you doing?" she yelled over the tooka ruckus.

There was an awkward pause as K-2 turned his head to look at her.

"Preparing to unload the cargo?"

"What?" asked Mayv, trying unsuccessfully to soothe even a single cat. "What cargo?"

"The animal cargo," replied K-2.

"The tookas? We're still in the air!"

"I am aware of that fact."

"You may *not* unload the cargo—I mean, the tookas—while we're in the air! Just...*no*! Hide in a crate or something if you can't handle them."

She tapped her wrist comlink.

“Chewie, please tell me you found a landing spot! Things are getting out of control back here!”

“MLARG!” answered Chewie.

He had finally found a gap in the trees, about half a klick from the edge of the chasm. He swung the ship around and let out a surprised **“GRUMMPHHH?”** when he saw another ship already there. An Imperial ship.



Chewie circled around for a better look, with one hand on the throttle in case the other, much larger ship should attack. But there was no response—no lights, no movement, and most important, no weapons turning on them.

The more Chewie looked, the more he was sure the ship was derelict. Not as long abandoned as that dead city, maybe, but clearly not a threat.

Whoever had flown the ship there must have wanted to land pretty badly. It appeared that they had bombed the forest, then landed in the crater they’d made.

They must have been a little bomb-happy, because the crater was a lot larger than necessary. There was plenty of room for Chewie to land their little cargo shuttle beside the other ship.

“NYARRM MYRRRGH RUHK,” he told Mayv over the comm. She didn’t understand what he said, but she figured it out quickly enough as their ship sank below the tops of the trees into the blue gloom of the forest.

Quickly, she wiped off her triangles and painted new ones. This time they formed a single star: courage. She definitely needed that!

CHAPTER 17



It was usually a big relief to Chewie to land a ship and get out to stretch properly and breathe some fresh air.

But not this time. As the rear cargo hatch swung open, he let out a disgusted **“SKRONK!”** Even though the ship’s scanner had said the air was breathable for humans (and Wookiees), it smelled terrible. About what you’d expect a planet made entirely of fungus trees to smell like—if the fungus itself had become moldy.

But that wasn’t the real problem. The real problem was the fear. This close to the ground it was a lot more than a bad feeling or even a creepy sensation. It was the kind of fear you would feel if General Grievous was stomping toward you with four lightsabers blazing. Or if Asajj Ventress had snuck up behind you in a dark alley. Or if you heard the steady wheezing of Darth Vader’s respirator.

But none of those villains was there. It was just the scorched ground of the crater and some green mist.

“I think I’ve finally figured out why the Aloos went to so much trouble to set us up for this job,” said Mayv, pulling on the exo-glove and curling the big metal fingers into a fist. “Because nobody would do this for money. If this was just for money I’d turn around right now.”

“WHURFF!” agreed Chewie.

And yet they both stepped forward to the threshold of the hatch and then down the short ramp to the ground, where the feeling of fear seemed to reach out and touch them.

“NGGGARRRRP!” complained Chewie, who had the horrible sensation of the loathsome soil actually touching his

bare feet. Mayv thought it was bad enough even through her thick boots.

The tookas were not so sure about it, either, and stood in the hatchway peering into the blue forest and tuttering peevishly. They couldn't say it, but they, too, had a bad feeling about this.

K-2, wholly unaffected by the seeping fear, being a droid, stepped over the tookas, pulling the floating antigrav crate behind him.

"Look! I am hauling your crate around the planet as requested."

"Uh...thanks," said Mayv. "Hey, what's that?"

"HRONN MURRGBUSHK!" said Chewie, which of course means, "Something dead."

They crossed the crater through ankle-deep green mist to get a closer look. Chewie had been right. It was something dead. Or rather, somebody. Or rather, some bodies.

"Judging by the skull shape and number of teeth, these appear to be Trandoshans," said K-2, prodding the remains with a foot. "They are fierce warriors and are tough to kill."

"For a cargo droid, you say some really strange stuff," said Mayv. "Why would you know something like that?"

K-2 looked at her with his big blank photoreceptors for a long moment, as if trying to think of a good explanation.

The truth was that he and Cassian had fought a few Trandoshans not long before, and they had indeed been very tough to kill. But that information hardly fit with his cover story of being a simpleminded Imperial cargo droid.

"I am programmed to provide valuable safety information," he replied finally. "I was attempting to warn you and the Wookiee that there is something in this forest capable of killing a squad of heavily armed space thugs."

"MURRRKUPP!" announced Chewie, excitedly pulling a blaster rifle from under one of the bodies. But then, after looking it over, he tossed it back on the ground.

"MRUUN MRUFFTUP," he cursed.

“What? Was it empty?” asked Mayv. Chewie nodded, then groaned again as he found two more useless blasters.

“So these whatever-you-called-them used up all their ammo and still got chomped? What on Oktar were they fighting?”

“I do not have that information,” replied K-2, “but I calculate that there is a ninety-eight-point-five percent chance that we will find out.”

SNARRRRL! That was not Chewbacca. That was something behind Chewbacca. That was something horrible.

“One hundred percent chance,” came the calm voice of K-2.

CHAPTER 18

The snarler stalked out of the blue forest into the crater.

Any words I use to describe it will make it sound less frightening than it really was.

If I say that it looked sort of like a dog, you might think of a friendly pup, when it was really as big and nasty as a Tanarian vulk.

But if I say it was like a Tanarian vulk, you might think that it was slow and plodding, when in fact it was as fast and vicious as a Mantellian Savrip.

But a Mantellian Savrip doesn't give you a picture of the writhing tentacles around its gaping jaws, which really weren't like anything I've ever seen. And I've seen a lot.

The other problem with trying to describe the snarler is that it didn't wait around to be described. It attacked.



SNARRRL!

With a great leap, it was after Chewie. It didn't even recognize the Wookiee as an enemy, just as food. And it was ravenous.

But our Chewbacca was unlike any food the snarler had ever pounced on before. Chewie was too smart to turn and run away; if he had, the creature would have caught him with another jump.

Instead, Chewie reached toward the lunging beast and with his great strength grabbed it by its oversize fangs and heaved.

"HUWHHRRR!"

The snarler's powerful jaws snapped shut just a little too late to get a taste of Chewie, but the smell of Wookiee filled its revolting, dripping nostrils. The beast twisted in midair, landing in a crouch, ready to strike again.

SSSSSNARRRL!

"HNURRR WRHHRPH!" the Wookiee shouted, telling Mayv to run back to the ship while he held off the snarler.

But of course Mayv didn't understand him and, honestly, probably wouldn't have obeyed anyway.

She had jumped back during the initial attack but was now leaping forward swinging the exo-glove like a big metal fist. The impact made the snarler step sideways, but it never took its eyes off Chewie.

A low, hateful *snarrrrrrrl* rumbled in its throat.

"Do something, droid!" Mayv yelled.

"I am not programmed for combat. Perhaps I should move the cargo crate to a safer—"

"Just hit it with something!" Mayv screamed.

Chewie had his arms wrapped around the snarler's huge jaws, trying to keep it from biting again. But its disgusting tentacles were flailing at him.

SNARRRRL! The creature whipped its head from side to side, and Chewie was thrown to the ground.

The snarler lunged after him, snapping at Chewie's neck as the Wookiee desperately tried to hold it off.

"GHHHRRRRRAHHH!"

"What do we do?" asked Mayv.

"Perhaps we should honor his noble sacrifice by escaping?" suggested K-2.

"You're useless!" snapped Mayv as she tried hitting the monster with the exo-glove again.

"Well, I am carrying the—"

YOOOOOWL!

K-2 was interrupted by the tookas! They had heard Chewie's cry and were bounding across the crater to his rescue.

CHAPTER 19



Led by Goldie, the tookas launched themselves claws-first onto the snarler's back. The creature barely would have noticed one tooka, but it couldn't ignore a swarm of them. They bit and scratched and ripped at its most sensitive parts. One of them got a big bite of neck tentacle...which was delicious. And Goldie took a nasty swipe at one of its eyes.

The monster shook itself, sending the tookas flying in all directions. But they landed on their feet and immediately sprinted for the forest.

With a hatred that was stronger than its hunger, the snarler tore after them.

The tookas disappeared among the weird blue trees, and a second later, so did the monster. The growlings and yowlings of the chase could be heard going deeper and deeper into the forest.

In moments, the chaos in the crater had stilled.

"MROARGHHH!" moaned Chewie, expressing gratefulness and concern all at once.

"Myrowrr!" responded Goldie, trotting back out of the trees and leaping onto his shoulder. I'm not sure what that meant, but it seemed to satisfy the Wookiee. He scratched Goldie between the ears, and that seemed to satisfy the tooka.

"I hope the other cats got away, too!" said Mayv.

"My sensors indicate that they have scattered in various directions and the large quadruped has given up the chase," said K-2.

“UUURRRRRRRMMG!” trilled Chewie happily.

“Yeah, that *is* good,” said Mayv, not even noticing that she was starting to understand Shyriiwook. I imagine that you are, too.

“However,” added K-2, “my sensors indicate that the large quadruped is returning to this area at high speed.”

“That is not good!”

“Additionally, my sensors indicate that two more of the large quadrupeds are nearby and headed this way.”

“WYYURRRRG!” groaned Chewie, painfully getting back to his feet.

“Listen,” said Mayv. “I’m going to have to be honest with you. Between this nasty green fear mist we’re wading in and the very real fear of getting bitten in half by whatever that was, I’m about to freak out!”

“RWWWRROOO!” said Chewie in agreement. Wookiees almost never actually freaked out, but the green mist was getting to him, too.

“Perhaps since I am unaffected by fear,” said K-2, “I should make a rational decision based on all available data.”

“Great! What do we do?” asked Mayv, and Chewie tilted his head to listen.

“We have two options: return to the ship or continue into the woods. Returning to the ship does not bring us closer to completing the mission, but going into the woods does. Thus, we should proceed into the woods.”

“HYARRKK!”

“Chewie’s right,” said Mayv. “Those snarlers could be anywhere in the forest. We might walk right into one.”

“I have a solution for dealing with the creatures. It is very unlikely that they will want to eat my metal body. In fact, by simply remaining still, I can probably escape their notice altogether.”

“What happens to me and the Wookiee while you’re doing this?”

“You will be eaten.”

CHAPTER 20



“What? We’ll be eaten?” snapped Mayv.

“Yes. I am...sorry?” said K-2, not sounding very sorry.

“That’s your rational decision? Letting us get eaten? You’re wasting time we don’t have!”

SNARRRRRL!

SNARRRRLLLLLLL!

Two snarlers emerged from the forest on the other side of the crater, sniffed, smelled Wookiee, and howled.

SNARRRRRRRRLLLLL! The new snarlers were greeted by the first one (with the newly torn neck tentacle), which was reentering the crater at full speed.

That was all it took for Chewie to make his decision.

“MROWGH GHRRMROWRIG!” This is a very common Kashyyyk expression meaning “Up into the trees!”

Mayv was not familiar with this expression, of course, but what Chewie did next was easy to understand. He grabbed the roll of cable out of the crate and sprinted toward the trees. He leapt high into the air and, somehow finding a handhold on one tree, swung himself onto a second tree, kicked off with both legs, and landed back on the first tree, finding a secure foothold on the lowest branch...at least twenty-five meters above the ground.

All with a yowling tooka cat clinging to his back.

Wow, thought Mayv. *I guess that’s why they wanted a Wookiee for this job.*

“MRRRAGHHH NURR NUUR!” Chewie yelled while throwing down one end of the cable.

Mayv knew what he meant and ran forward to grab it... but of course the snarlers ran much faster.

They were almost on her by the time she got to the cable. She jumped as high as she could and grabbed on to it.

Almost immediately, her hands began slipping. She started to panic, then the servomotors in her exo-glove tightened her grip...just in time!

The lead snarler was already lunging at her with its mouth wide open and its tentacles writhing. Then she was jerked several meters into the air as Chewie hauled on the cable.

The beast's jaws snapped shut on nothing, but it wasn't giving up yet. It dropped onto its hind legs. Claws dug into the ground, huge muscles bulged, and it sprang back up for another bite.

Mayv had a nightmarish view of gaping jaws and writhing tentacles, but Chewie was pulling her up smooth and steady. Soon she was up higher than a snarler could jump.

That was when her fear of heights kicked in. Oktarians weren't climbers. They liked solid, flat ground, or at least a sturdy floor. The idea of hanging from a cable would horrify them.

But right now, for Mayv, it was better than *not* hanging from a cable, because that would have meant instant death at the claws and teeth of three snarlers.

And it didn't last too long. In a moment, Chewie was reaching down a huge furry hand to help her up onto a comfortably wide branch.

"MHHHRRRR," he trilled reassuringly as she held on to him for balance. **"GHMMRRR RRRUP."**

Look, I know you're not reading this to hear about hugging. But what do you want me to say? Wookiees like to hug. Mayv needed a hug. They hugged. Goldie purred. Everyone felt better...well, not K-2. He was still on the ground far below, standing perfectly still while the snarlers sniffed and snarled around him.

"The fear," said Mayv, rubbing her aching shoulder, "isn't quite so bad up here. I feel like I can finally think straight."

"ROWRIGGHH HRMKUHRNNN," Chewie rumbled. This is another Wookiee saying. It means something like "The trees are life," but it means a lot more than just that the trees are alive. It's very hard to understand even if you understand Shyriiwook, and of course, Mayv didn't. So don't let me get all distracted by Wookiee culture here.



Chewbacca held up his hand and placed it against the blue trunk of the tree, which was soft and smooth, more like a fungus than tree bark. He motioned for Mayv to touch it, too.

Up to then, she hadn't touched the tree directly, only through her boots and the exo-glove's grippers.

She put her bare palm flat against the tree and all her fear seemed to drain away. She felt a connection...to the tree, to all the trees, to Chewie, to the tooka, even in a

strange way to the beastly snarlers far below. She felt peace and patience and hope.

She jerked her hand away as if the tree had burned her.

"HRUUH?" asked Chewie.

She couldn't explain. Not in words.

The feelings had been too much. Those were emotions she hadn't felt in years. She hadn't had any reason to, and if she had she would have resisted feeling them—would have pushed them out of her mind.

Especially hope. Look what hope had done to her parents, to her people. It had fooled them. It had made them easy targets. She had long before learned not to trust hope, not even to feel it.

Mayv—stealing and sneaking around the warehouse levels of Coruscant—had been driven not by hope but by a grim determination. Her energy had come from anger at the wrongs done to her planet, not from any real hope of setting them right.

But now there it was. She had felt hope when she touched the tree. It had felt good. Not like a trick but like a new kind of energy. It had shocked her at first, but already she longed to feel it again.

"ROWRIGGHH HRMKUHHRRNNN," Chewie repeated.

Cautiously, she touched the tree trunk again with a finger. The energy flowed into her again: hope, courage, and...something else she had never really known...peace.

"Are all the trees like this?" she murmured. "I guess they must be. Yes...they are, I can feel it."

The tooka, meanwhile, was rubbing her ear-type things against the tree in complete bliss. This was clearly millions of times better than the trash-ridden lower levels of Coruscant where she had grown up.

"I read something once," said Mayv, "about the Force. Have you heard of it?"

"MYYYURH MYYYURHH MYYYURH," Chewie said, chuckling. Had he heard of the Force? He'd been hearing about it his

whole life—for over two hundred years—and had known several Jedi—Ahsoka Tano, Luminara Unduli, and even Yoda.

“Do you think that could be what we’re feeling when we touch the trees? The Force?”

Chewie just said “Trees are life” again. To him it wasn’t that surprising at all. Not every Wookiee was Force-sensitive, but every Wookiee knew that being among trees connected them to the Force and the Force to them. Baby Wookiees learned that before their first shedding.

But Chewie had spent so long in ships and space stations, loading bays and detention cells, bars and cantinas that he had almost forgotten what the saying meant.

He rested his whole body against the tree and purred as happily as he took a.

It was almost as good as being home.

For Mayv it was even better than being home. Her home had been a war zone. This was the opposite.

She leaned her head against the trunk and soaked in the peace and gladly let go of the anger and fear. It was the most beautiful moment of her life.

“I’ll just stay here with the insane killer monsters then, shall I?” called K-2 below, his voice still calm but his volume raised. “All eight of them?”

CHAPTER 21



Mayv looked down and saw that there were, in fact, eight snarlers.

However, they were already losing interest in K-2 and, sniffing the air, trotting off toward the ship.

As both Chewie and Mayv knew, the ship's cargo hold smelled strongly of tooka cat even though the cats had fled into the forest.

The snarlers followed the smell right up the boarding ramp and through the hatchway, tongues dripping the whole way. Smashing and crashing began as the snarlers tore the place apart looking for the cats.

"NYAARRR!" yelled Chewie from the tree, protective of his ship even if it *was* cruddy.

Suddenly, the ship's cargo door slammed shut, trapping the creatures inside.

"I have achieved victory over all eight of the insane killer monsters," announced K-2. There was an awkward pause. "You're welcome."

"Uh...great, but what are we supposed to do when we need to use the ship again?" asked Mayv.

"You'll probably be dead before then."

"Excuse me?"

"The chances of your returning to the ship alive are very small," said K-2, "however, they are better now that I have single-handedly achieved victory over all eight of the killer snarlers." Awkward pause. "You're welcome."

"Chewie," said Mayv quietly, "is it just me, or do you think that droid is really weird?"

"MRRRRRULLL," said Chewie, shrugging. In his experience most droids were really weird.

"Well, should we head back down? Try to get through the forest before any more snarlers show up?"

"HHHUMMGHHRA NWURRR ROWRIGGHH!" said Chewie, pointing up. As you've probably guessed, this is another Wookiee saying related to trees and paths and destiny.

It's very poetic but in this case also quite practical. Over their heads, the forking trunks of the trees reached out far enough to touch and actually join with other trees.

Goldie was already scampering across one of these connections in pursuit of a large bug of some sort.

"RHHOWROO. RHHOWROO. RHHOWROO HOWG," Chewie explained, pointing to one tree after another.

"You mean you want us to go from tree to tree? All the way to that chasm?"

"MHHHHRGGROT!" said Chewie with a satisfied nod.

Mayv groaned.

"Oktar Crumbuth! You do know that Oktarians are afraid of heights, right? We only have one hill on the whole planet, and no one ever climbs it! We even sing hymns about it! I may be higher up right now than anyone in the history of Oktaro! I'd be freaking out if it wasn't for the trees keeping me calm."

Chewie waved his hands to try to show her how climbing higher would actually make it safer to cross from tree to tree.

"Well..." she said at last, "I might be able to do it, but what about the cargo droid?"

"The cargo droid will not be doing that," came K-2's amplified voice from below. Mayv hadn't realized he was listening or could even hear them at that distance.

"RHHOWROO HOWG!" insisted Chewie.

"I have compiled a list of thirty-seven reasons why I should stay on the ground. One: the K-X series operates at optimal efficiency on flat surfaces. Two: being odor-free, I

appear to be in no danger from the ground-based predators. Three: I—”

“RHHAA GHUNRUT!” That was Chewie’s way of saying he did not wish to hear all thirty-seven reasons. I fear it wasn’t very polite.

K-2SO was about to say something in return that was even less polite when he remembered that he was supposed to be K-2SB, simple cargo droid. So he picked up his crate.

“Throw down one end of the cable and attach the other end securely,” said K-2.

Chewie wrapped the cable around a branch, then let the coil drop.

K-2 took the loose end and inserted it in an opening between his shoulders.

Three small wheels clamped down on the cable and, with the help of some whining servomotors, began to spin. K-2 was propelled up the side of the tree with surprising speed.

He hooked an arm around a branch, then reversed the servomotors. The cable was pulled up behind him as fast as Chewie could coil it.

“I brought your crate,” K-2 told Mayv, as if it was perfectly normal for him to be hanging by one arm from a blue tree while cable whirled out of a hole in his back.

“Uh, thanks,” said Mayv, checking to make sure the medkit was still in there. She was starting to think they were definitely going to need it. (And she was right.)

Chewie slung the roll of cable over his shoulder and grunted a **“HRUNG?”** that clearly meant, “Ready?”

“Just a second,” said Mayv, wiping the triangles from her forehead. “I’m not taking another step until I repaint.”

“GRNH?” Chewie grunted curiously.

“I guess Wookiees don’t paint treblixes, do they?” Mayv laughed. “Too much hair!”

“YRUNK,” agreed Chewie.

“I’m making the pattern for gracefulness,” continued Mayv, clustering four triangles over each eye. “Not a symbol

I use much, but I figured it couldn't hurt when I'm this far off the ground!"

Whether this symbol—or any of them—worked, I can't say. But Mayv believed, and maybe that was all that mattered.

"All right," she said, "ready when you are."

Chewie looked up and then, without hesitating, jumped. He caught the next branch and swung himself up onto it. It had been a while since he had climbed a tree, but every motion was as natural and easy to him as swimming is to a Gungan or flying is to a Geonosian.

He was about to reach back down to lift up Mayv, but he was too late.

Feeling graceful, hopeful, and possibly overconfident, Mayv was already trying to follow him Wookiee-style.

She jumped as high as she could, then activated the exoglove. The fingers extended almost a meter and grabbed on to the branch right next to Chewie. With a click of the controls, Mayv was pulled up after it. She swung a leg over the branch and hauled herself up to sit next to the Wookiee.

"MLURRRPH!" he grunted approvingly.

"All right...I think I can do this," she told him, "and it's definitely better than being a chew toy for whatever we might run into down there."

Then she jumped up to grab a higher branch with the exoglove, and it pulled her to where Goldie was impatiently waiting.

Chewie cocked his head and tried to figure out the girl.

She was starting to remind him of Han—one minute grumbling about something being impossible, the next minute ready to charge in at full speed.

It was a dangerous way of doing things. Crazy, in fact. And it suited Chewie just fine.

CHAPTER 22



After a few more branches, Mayv went on ahead while Chewie stopped and used the cable to boost up K-2.

"Uh, Chewie!" Mayv called down. "There's something up here! A lot of somethings!"

Chewie raced to catch up with her and came face to face with a chubby eight-legged bug-type thing that was walking down the tree trunk. It was almost the same size as a tooka cat and almost as ugly as a tooka is cute. Its body was a pasty pale blob with smaller pasty pale blobs sticking out in places.

It stopped and stared at Chewie with two of its four big lidless eyes.

"*Glorbbbbb?*" it bleated, flapping its wide lips at him as it burbled out the "*bbbbbb*" part.

"GROURRB!" growled Chewie.

"Uh, maybe don't growl at them," said Mayv. "There are a *lot* of them. They don't seem dangerous, but let me check and see what the mining scouts found."

While she flipped open her vidscroll, Chewie peered past the bug and saw a long line of identical bugs all marching behind the first one. They seemed pretty grumpy at being halted. "*Glorb?*" each one asked the one in front of it.

"*Glorbbbb?*"

The problem was solved when the leader turned, walked partway around the tree, then turned back toward the ground and continued plodding along.

"*Glorb,*" it called to its comrades, and they followed along exactly in their leader's path.

"The scouts called them glorbs. Looks like they're harmless," said Mayv, "unless they build a nest in your equipment. Hopefully we won't be here long enough for that. They're kind of cute in a way. You have anything like this on your planet?"

"Rwww," answered Chewie, and Mayv had no idea if that was a yes or a no. (It was a no.)

"Hey, Kay-Tu," she called down. "Look for some big bugs coming your way!"

"What should I do with the big bugs?"

"I don't know. Just look at them I guess."

"Exciting," said K-2 in his deadpan tone.

"I really don't know about that droid," Mayv muttered to Chewbacca.

Chewie leaned back and looked as far up as he could, following the line of glorbs. There seemed to be hundreds of the creatures crossing some sort of bridge to get to that trunk from a different trunk.

He climbed up to take a look. It *was* a bridge. Or at least it served the same purpose as one.

The branch seamlessly grew into (or out of) their tree and into the next. And that tree had one growing out of (or into) it and connecting to another trunk and so on, all at exactly the same height. The branches seemed to have grown for the sole purpose of giving the bugs an easy way to move from tree to tree.

There's a fascinating reason for that, but right then Chewie was not particularly interested in why it was there, just that it *was* there.

He trilled merrily.

He had found the path in the trees, just as he said he would.

CHAPTER 23



“But do they go in the right direction?” asked Mayv when she reached the bridge branch. Or maybe I should call it a branch bridge. Anyway...the thing that went from one tree to the next tree.

“MRUMPH,” assured Chewie, pointing.

“Are you sure? I’m having a little trouble figuring out this holomap....”

“MRUMPH!”

“Okay, okay,” she said, returning the vidscroll to her belt. “You’re the Wookiee, so I’ll let you handle forest navigation.”

“MRUMPH!” chortled Chewie cheerfully. It really was great to be back in a forest, he thought. Even a weird semifungal one.

“Kay-Tu!” yelled Mayv. “We found a path! We’re heading for the rift now.”

“Should I come on up or continue looking at these bugs?”

“Up, please,” said Mayv, rolling her eyes. “You see what I mean?” she whispered to Chewie. “I think his processors may be damaged.”

Chewie gave yet another shrug and rolled out the cable for K-2 to climb.

He would have done a lot more than shrug if he had only known that K-2 hadn’t used his time to watch the bugs. Instead he had silently transmitted a holomessage to Cassian with every detail of the mission so far.

“Stick with the girl and help her get the book,” ordered Cassian, “but we can’t afford to let the Emperor get his hands on it. So just make sure you’re the one who actually gets it, not the girl and definitely not the Wookiee.”

CHAPTER 24



Crossing the bridges between trees was as simple for K-2 as walking on the ground. He had no fear of falling, no vertigo, no nerves, and perfect balance.

Chewbacca was the same, although he came by these abilities naturally, whereas K-2's skills were artificial.

Mayv, however, had none of those abilities, artificial or otherwise, and each bridge crossing for her was a feat of courage—stepping away from the tree trunk, out onto a narrow branch with nothing on either side except a fatal fall.

At first, she'd edge out onto the bridge as far as she could while holding on to K-2 for balance, then take four or five nervous steps across to where Chewbacca was waiting with an outstretched hand. Soon the nervous steps became confident ones and she could follow Chewie across without breaking her stride.

K-2 would then stomp fearlessly after her and they'd do it again for the next tree.

"This is taking a while," said Mayv, "but so far nothing is trying to eat us, so that's good."

"GRURRRUGH!" agreed Chewie.

As they went, they saw many different kinds of glorbs. Some walked on the tops of branches. Some walked on the undersides. Some flew. Some rode around on larger glorbs.

Despite all the variations of bugs—tiny, small, big, monstrous, furry, beaked, long-legged, short-legged, no-legged, winged, greebled, and so on—there was an essential *glorb*-ness to all of them. The other thing they all had in common was a fear of the ground. Even on the most

crowded trees, there was never a glorb within fifty meters of the dirt below. The bugs avoided it as if it were Mustafar lava.

Unfortunately for the glorbs, they were unprepared to avoid Goldie. She had already sampled several of the smaller varieties of glorb and was feeling very pleasantly stuffed and just wishing everyone would stop for a few minutes so she could have a nap.

She got her wish.

SNAP!

CHAPTER 25



"I'm falling," said K-2 as he plummeted to the ground. The bridge he had been walking across was not strong enough to hold a cargo droid.

There was nothing Mayv or Chewie could do but watch him disappear into the murky green mist that hid the forest floor. At last they heard him hit the ground with a *THWONK*.

"Are you okay?" Mayv yelled after the impact.

"I see a worm with hook hands," K-2 said calmly but at maximum volume.

"I'm not sure if that means he's malfunctioning or if he's found some kind of horrible new monster," Mayv said to Chewie.

"The second one," boomed K-2. "Cable. Now."

"MRRRUNG!" answered Chewie, unslinging the cable, securing one end, and letting the coil drop down into the mist.

A minute later, K-2 was back...with a dent in one shoulder, a lot of new scratches, and some disturbing news.

"We should go," he said.

"Aren't you worried about the bridges? What if we find another one that isn't strong enough to—"

"We should go," repeated K-2.

"What did you see down there?"

"As a cargo droid, I have a limited knowledge of galactic wildlife. I saw a worm with hook hands. And it is no longer down there. It is halfway up here. We should go."

Mayv flipped open her vidscroll. "Hmmm, I don't see anything about any worms with hands. The miners did find

some kind of snake monster they called a sniffer, but that was a lot bigger than a worm. Anyway, a worm shouldn't be a problem as long as we watch our step, right?"

"Incorrect," said K-2. "We should go. It is here."

Mayv looked down and saw a huge snakelike shape rising out of the gloom. "It's huge! I thought you said it was a worm!"

"Yes. With hook hands. We should go."

"HYRUUK!" agreed Chewie, and he turned to sprint across the next bridge.

Then he froze in his tracks with a yell:

"GGRRRRWWUGH!"

Just across the bridge was a massive fleshy shape... another worm! It was at least as tall as Chewie, but there was no way of telling how tall it actually was, because they couldn't see the end of it.

Now Mayv knew what K-2 had meant by "hook hands," and she wished she didn't.

The hook hands—exactly ten of them—were clustered around a large, oozing four-holed snout on the end of the worm.

The sniffer turned from side to side as the four nostrils investigated the air. Then it turned toward the Wookiee.

It moved without seeming to move. There was no sign of any muscles contracting or any slithering. The long wormlike body just seemed to extend...stretching toward our heroes, the bony, long, many-jointed hook hands grasping and flapping.

Three of the hands already held glorbs, their tiny legs waving frantically and helplessly.

"Glorbbb...glorbbbb...glorbbb..."

"Poor things," said Mayv. "I wonder if—"

She never finished.

CHAPTER 26



The sniffer turned in her direction and struck. She would have been knocked off the tree if the sniffer's hook hands hadn't grabbed her. Once they had her, there was no chance they would let her fall.

They held her not with a strong grip but rather with a strange dry stickiness. She could barely move, much less fight back.

"Oktar RUP!" she hollered, half cursing, half praying.

Then she remembered the exo-glove. She thumbed the control and the metal fingers sprang out and jabbed deep into the wormy flesh. But the sniffer didn't even seem to notice. It was busy grabbing at her with its other hook hands.

"Chewie! Help!" she yelled, but the Wookiee was already leaping into action.

He grabbed her jacket and tried to pull her free, but the sniffer began to retract, calmly pulling itself down and away as if no struggle was going on at all.

"GWAARRGH!" Chewie yelled as he was forced to either let go of Mayv's jacket or be pulled off the bridge.

He reached for his blaster, then remembered for the hundredth time that it had been confiscated by Alinka Aloo back on Coruscant.

"MRORRGHHHHH!" A Wookiee rage was building inside him.

He reached for the only thing nearby that he could use to smash the life out of the giant worm: K-2.

Grabbing the droid by his legs, the mighty Chewbacca raised K-2 high over his head and chopped down with him like an ax.

Being a droid, K-2 actually had time to think about what was going on while it was happening.

Should he defend himself against the Wookiee or in some way attempt to assist? Neither his original Imperial programming nor his reprogramming by Cassian covered this situation.

But Cassian had just told him to help the girl find what she was looking for. If the girl was eaten by a worm with hook hands, the mission would fail.

So instead of resisting, he stiffened all his joints to become more club-like.

WHAM!

K-2's heavy upper body slammed into the worm with a force that would have staggered a rancor.

The sniffer worm was knocked sideways. But it wasn't stunned. It didn't seem to notice that any more than it had the exo-glove.

It just continued to retract, dragging Mayv down into the depths of the forest, heedless of bridges or heights, as if it was held up by some great strength, which indeed it was...a strength greater than anything Chewie had ever encountered.

But he was about to encounter it.

"MWORRRRRRRRRRRGH!" doesn't mean anything in particular, and yet it means a lot.

To Mayv, being dragged helplessly through the forest, it meant that things weren't hopeless yet. Her new friend was not going to abandon her.

CHAPTER 27



Chewie tossed K-2 aside. Luckily, the droid was able to grab on to the branch; otherwise he would have taken his second fall in a matter of minutes.

Then the Wookiee leapt out into the space between the trees, knowing only that he was following Mayv and the monster but not where or how he was going to land.

The reckless jump became a fall as gravity pulled him downward. Just as it appeared that he was going to smash his brains out on a branch, he twisted in midair and landed on it instead with a mighty stomp that shook the whole tree.

He was about to take another leap when K-2 called “WAIT” at his highest volume level.

Chewie decided to spare one second to find out what the droid wanted.

He looked back. High above him he could see the droid hanging from a branch by one arm. Next to him, Goldie was peering over the edge of the branch yowling.

“You’ll need this,” said K-2 in his unsettling mixture of high volume but complete calm.

A compartment in his torso opened, and K-2 reached inside and pulled out a blaster. With the sort of perfect aim that only a droid could manage, he threw it so Chewie made an easy one-handed catch.

Obviously, Chewie wanted to know where the droid had gotten the blaster and why he hadn’t used it before, but it was not the time. And only much later would it occur to him to wonder why the droid hadn’t used the blaster when the snarler was about to eat Chewie.

"HYYYRAK," he called, stuffing the blaster in the pouch on his bandolier.

Then he took another great leap and disappeared into the gloom.

"Now it's just you and me, cat," said K-2 to the tooka as he pulled himself back up onto the branch.

The tooka hissed suspiciously.

CHAPTER 28



The thing about Wookiees is, yes, they're big and strong, but they have a lot more to offer than just size and strength.

If Mayv's partner on the mission had been, say, a Trandoshan like Bossk the bounty hunter, he would still be standing back there calculating how the loss of a team member affected him personally. His size and strength wouldn't really matter, because he would still be just standing there.

And honestly, a Wookiee might be doing that, too, if a worm ate someone that Wookiee didn't like. But Chewie liked Mayv. Part of it was her story about growing up in the ruins and losing her parents, but he had actually decided he liked her before that. Wookiees can usually get a sense of someone right away (except a devious droid like K-2SO, of course). And even though he'd seen through her pretense of being first a tooka keeper and then a bounty hunter, Chewie was pretty sure he knew the real Mayv now. And he liked her.

So that was why Chewie was taking absurd chances, lunging across the wide gloomy spaces between trees with no idea where he was going to land, and sometimes not even landing at all but using a branch to swing off in a new direction.

When he got low enough to see the ground through the mist, he just let go and dropped the rest of the way. It was farther than he should have dropped. He should have slowed down. He should have found a safer route. Wookiees aren't magic, and they aren't unbreakable.

But the landing didn't break him. It hurt him, but it didn't break him. Whether that was just luck or he knew what he was doing, I can't tell you, but maybe he did know what he was doing, because he landed on his feet and used both arms to absorb the impact.

The fear flowed into him again. Through his feet, through his hands. It just seemed to seep from the ground itself. And it was much stronger there, farther into the forest, than it had been where they landed the ship.

But neither the pain nor the fear was enough to slow him down.

He had a dim idea which way the worm was retreating, and he chased after it, heedless of any snarlers or unknown creatures he might run into.

In fact he did run into something—a big golden-shelled thing that lay on the forest floor with its meter-wide mouth open, perhaps hoping a glorb would fall in. Chewie saw it too late to dodge it, so he hurdled the mouth, stepped on the nose, and launched himself on top of the shell.

From there he took a moment to look around and listen. The sniffer moved almost silently, but its captive, Mayv, was noisy. "Chewie!" she yelled, and he instantly leapt off the shell and raced after her.

What was strange, he thought, was that the sniffer worm seemed to be carrying Mayv in the direction they had already been headed: toward the chasm.

He kept running and soon saw where the trees ended and the green mist was bright and the fear like a wall.

Again, a Trandoshan—or just about anyone else, really—would have been turned back by that fear. But a Wookiee—and especially Chewbacca—had a different reaction to fear. It was nothing deep or philosophical like a Jedi might come up with. And there was no desire to gain strength from the fear as a Sith Lord might want to do.

It was really just the desire to take a giant Wookiee fist and punch fear in the face until it went away.

And so far that had worked pretty well for Chewbacca; he had smashed fear into oblivion many times on many planets.

But as he passed through the last of the trees, he finally slowed and stopped.

He'd found something too big to punch.

CHAPTER 29



It was a living thing. He knew that right away.

But it was bigger than any living thing he'd seen before.

And he was seeing only the top of it. It swam in the sea of thick green vapor that filled the chasm and splashed over the edges in waves of horrid green mist.

The creature had been submerged when they flew overhead but had since lifted its many mouths above the surface to feed.

How many mouths? Chewie didn't count them. And I don't blame him. As the old saying goes, when a rancor is chasing you, you don't count its warts.

You want to know what this thing was, but how can I answer that?

There's a name for the creature: Vathyr. But the people who once spoke that name are all dead. Long dead. (Many of them killed by the Vathyr.)

Describing it might be better than naming it. The word that comes to mind is *hill*, although if you could ever see the whole thing, you might say *mountain*.

So it looked like an island floating in a sea of fear.

And as I said, there were many mouths. Each one wide open with a tongue extended. Very long tongues. So long you might mistake one for a giant worm if it was chasing you through a gloomy blue forest with its hook hands.

Across the galaxy, there were many creatures that had long quick tongues that they zipped out to catch screerats or thwips or whatever else was handy.

But this creature had evolved way beyond that. Its many tongues could do more than zip out. They could hunt.

They had nostrils to sniff out prey and hook hands to catch it.

Each tongue searched through the trees until it caught all it could, and then it retracted back into the mouth it started from. There the hooks held on to the food until the brain far, far below learned which mouth had caught a meal and sent a message to the stomach to digest.

As the long hunt wore on, each tongue returned, each mouth closed, and the stomach was at last satisfied.

And then the mountain sank back into the sea.

CHAPTER 30



Chewie didn't know all that, of course, but one glance at the horrid thing was enough to tell him that Mayv was about to be eaten.

But at last he caught sight of her.

The sniffer (which was really a tongue) had dragged her almost to the edge of the chasm.

"HGRRRWURRRRR!"

"Chewie?" yelled Mayv in disbelief. *"Thank Oktar!"*

She twisted in the sniffer's grip, trying to see what was happening.

Chewie raced alongside the hideous tongue, trying to pull Mayv free with one hand while pressing the blaster directly against the sniffer's pimpled flesh with the other.

BZZZRAP BBBZZZRAP BBBBZZZZRAPPP!

Each shot of the blaster made a gaping hole in the tongue but did nothing to stop its relentless retreat back to its origin mouth. It didn't even seem to react to the blasts.

"Chewie! Watch out!" yelled Mayv.

Too late. One of the hooks whipped around Chewie's arm and held him tight.

"HYARLL!" he yelped as he was pulled off his feet and dragged along with Mayv and the glorbs closer and closer to the cliff's edge...beyond which lay the many mouths of the great beast.

Chewie took aim at the hook that was holding his arm. If he could shoot it at the base, it should come loose and he'd

be free.

But before he pulled the trigger, he thought again. If he got loose, he'd fall behind and might not catch up in time to save Mayv.

So he aimed instead for the hooks that were holding her. *BZRAP! BZRAP! BZRAP!* And it was done. She fell free from the tongue, the severed hooks still wrapped tightly about both of her arms and one leg.

She was able to look around and orient herself for the first time since being captured.

"Oktar Bakkvena!" she cried in disbelief.

She saw it all. The huge mountainous thing. The gaping, drooling mouths. The tongues dragging in a variety of glorbs and other strange creatures, even a snarler—and most improbably...Chewbacca.

The Wookiee was taking aim to blast himself free, but the tongue dragged him over the edge of the cliff before he could do it.

"Mag nessom!" Mayv yelled in horror, slipping into her native language again in the excitement.

She ran toward the edge, but there was nothing she could do. Chewie was out of reach, dangling by one arm high above the horrid green mist of the abyss.

If he shot himself loose from the hook hand, he'd fall to certain death.

But if he didn't, the sniffer would deliver him to the gaping mouth just a few meters away.

"I think he'd be better off falling into the abyss." It was K-2, finally catching up. "Being digested sounds very unpleasant."

Mayv shuddered. She'd read somewhere about a creature that took a thousand years to digest its prey. Even a single hour would be agony!

"Can you help him?" begged Mayv.

"No," replied K-2, "but I brought your crate." He helpfully lifted the crate, with Goldie riding inside.

“Will you shut up about the crate?” she yelled and turned back to watch Chewie and pray for a miracle. *“Oktar rup, Oktar rup, Oktar rup...”*

Goldie got one look at Chewie in the grip of the huge creature and cowered back inside the crate, already mourning the loss of her big furry friend.

But Chewie hadn’t given up yet, of course.

He waited as the tongue took him closer and closer to the drooling mouth. It opened wide, belching out a terrible stench of rotting glorbs and showing four rows of jagged black teeth.

And then just an instant before it bit, Chewie fired the blaster. The hook flopped sickeningly but didn’t detach. Chewie fired again, and this time he dropped like a rock.

He landed on the mouth’s lower lip, almost slipping in the drool, but his huge Wookiee feet dug in and then he jumped clear just as the tongue disappeared into the mouth and the black teeth snapped shut.

The mouth stayed shut. It had a few glorbs to digest, and that would do for now. The creature would remain forever unaware of how close it had come to a delicious Wookiee dinner.

No longer in danger of being eaten, Chewie was still in very real danger of falling off the creature into the chasm.

He shoved the blaster back into his pouch and used both hands to cling to the scaly surface of the worm. But it was slimy as well as scaly, and he felt himself slowly sliding down. He had to do something before it was too late.

There was no hope of jumping back to the edge of the chasm; the distance was too far even for a Wookiee. And he could hardly throw the cable across while clinging to the creature with all four limbs.

He looked down to see what he was sliding toward. Another mouth! But this one still had its tongue extended deep into the forest sniffing out glorbs.

With the same remarkable skills that had served him high in the trees, he dashed across the disgusting fleshy bridge to rejoin Mayv and K-2 on the side of the chasm.

He'd barely touched the ground before Goldie was leaping from the antigrav crate to his shoulder, *mrowr*-ing happily.

"Wow!" said Mayv, jumping up to hug him. "I can't believe you did all that to save me!"

"YARRHH RRRRRRRUNNNN MMONNRGH!" which is a very old Wookiee expression about being there to catch a young Wookiee who slips out of a tree. It's something Chewie had said many times to his own son, Lumpawaroo, and the whole thing was very, very sweet.

"Can I have my blaster back?" asked K-2.

CHAPTER 31



Chewie reached for the blaster in his pouch but found only the pouch. The blaster was gone.

“HRRUMK?” Chewie said regretfully.

K-2 just stared. He was actually speechless. His processors were too busy recalculating his chances of completing the mission without a blaster. They weren’t good.

Plus, eventually he’d have to explain to Cassian why he gave the Wookiee his weapon.

He had a lot to process.

They all did...and surprisingly, they had a moment to do it. Things were actually peaceful.

True, they were standing on a planet that seemed to be made of fear, next to a chasm that was filled with fear, in which swam the biggest, scariest monster any of them had ever seen.

I don’t think it even knew they were there. Its great eye—well below the surface—was closed. And its tongues were all busy hunting in the forest or coming back with the food they had already captured.

For the moment at least, nothing was trying to kill our heroes. So they walked to the nearest tree and leaned their backs against it, letting the peace and hope that flowed from the tree try to counteract the fear that was drifting up out of the chasm and lapping at their feet.

“I bet my treblixes got smudged, didn’t they?”

“MWUFF?” said Chewie, unsure what the polite answer was.

"Time to repaint them anyway," said Mayv, pulling the cap off her paint tube. She rubbed away the smudges and began stamping a long double row all the way across her forehead: gratitude.

"I've got a theory about this place," said Mayv as she worked. "Remember what I was saying about the Force?"

"YHGARRR..."

"Well, I read some books about it once. About Jedi and Sith and the light side and the dark side of the Force. And the two sides are supposed to be in balance, but sometimes they're not."

"YHHHGARRRR..."

"I think that's what happened to this planet. It's like the actual ground here is strong with the dark side. But the trees grew to surround all that dark with the good parts of the Force. That's what we felt when we touched the trees."

"YHHHGRARRR..."

"So the planet was in balance. And people lived here and everything was okay, especially if they stayed high up in the trees. But then the ground cracked open and the dark side couldn't be contained. It just oozed out of that crack, and the trees couldn't hold it in. That's when the people on this planet were doomed."

"MYUUURGGGG..."

"And what is really bothering me is that Alinka sent us here to this place that is so strong in the dark side to find a temple with a sacred book. What if it's a Sith temple? Or some other dark side cult?"

“NURGGGH...”

“And what if it’s like a Sith training book or something? Maybe Alinka and her father don’t want it for their collection....Maybe they want it for the Emperor!”

“WRRHHHHUUUGHH!” groaned Chewie. He didn’t like the idea of taking the Emperor a Sith handbook one bit.

K-2 was thinking, *I can’t believe you’re just now figuring this out*, but for once he was able to not say anything. *A simple cargo droid*, he reminded himself. *You’re a simple cargo droid.*

“So what do we do now?” asked Mayv. “Do we do something that might help the Empire?”

“WHUGGGGGG,” groaned Chewbacca. This sort of thing made his head hurt. He liked it better when he knew whom to punch and whom to rescue.

“I guess we don’t really have a choice, though, do we?” said Mayv. “That’s why they went to so much trouble to force us into this job. So we couldn’t just decide not to do it. You have to save your friend, and I have to save the *Mola Oktaro* for my people...right?”

“HWWWWRUNGHHH,” agreed Chewie, though not as enthusiastically as he would have just five minutes earlier.

“There is one problem with your plan,” said K-2, trying to get the mission back on track. “How can you steal something from a temple when there is no temple here?”

“Let me see how close we are to the coordinates Alinka gave us,” said Mayv, flipping open her vidscroll.

“It looks like we’re about—”

“Point two five one klicks away,” interrupted K-2. “The actual spot would be right there.”

He pointed at a spot farther along the edge of the chasm. There was too much murk, gloom, and creepy green mist to see what was there.

“All right, let’s go take a look,” said Mayv.

“Wait,” said K-2. The antenna popped out of his head again, and he was still for a moment. “My sensors indicate that there is a large rock there but no temple.”

“Well, anything that’s not either a happy fungus tree or evil dirt or a snarler or a big tongue is worth checking out,” said Mayv. “In fact, since the sniffers don’t seem to be able to sniff you, maybe you should go have a look around. Chewie and I could still use a few minutes to recover! We’re not droids, you know.”

“Unfortunately not,” said K-2, then turned and trotted off into the gloom.

CHAPTER 32



“Listen, Chewie,” said Mayv when she thought—incorrectly—K-2 was out of earshot. “I wanted to talk to you without the droid around. I’m worried about him! Where did he get that blaster?”

“NHURRRM GRUMM,” said Chewie, gesturing to show how the droid had pulled the blaster from inside his body.

“That is weird,” said Mayv, “but what I mean is: why does a cargo droid even have a blaster? Alinka was so careful to make sure that we didn’t have any weapons. Why would she give the droid one? And like I’ve been saying all along, that droid just doesn’t act like a cargo droid.”

“DRUUWHHLA MYURGRRR! DRUHHHR CHURRRBRRR.” Chewie was trying to explain that he was pretty sure K-2 was an Imperial security droid, not a cargo droid, but the language barrier was too much. So he ended up just nodding to show that he agreed they should keep a very close eye on K-2.

K-2, hearing their conversation, reminded himself to try to act more like a dumb cargo droid. But it was hard.

Meanwhile, he had checked out the rock he had detected with his sensors and was back to tell them about it.

“I found the rock,” he announced.

“What was it?”

“A rock.”

“What did it look like?”

“A rock.”

“That’s the only thing you can say about it?”

“Yes. Would you like to look at a holovid of it?”

“Yes, can you send it to my vidscroll?”

K-2 didn't answer.

"I said, 'Can you send it to my vidscroll?'"

"I have done that."

"Oh...couldn't you beep or something to let me know?"

"Beep," the droid said slowly.

Mayv mumbled something rude, then pulled her vidscroll open and saw a horrifying image.

It was the creature! The mountainous mouth beast that had sniffers for tongues and had almost eaten her!

"This is the monster," she told K-2.

"No, it's a rock."

"Wait...the rock looks like the monster?"

"Yes."

"So it's a statue? That's got to be it! It must mark the entrance to the temple!"

"I did not see an—"

"HYARRMMMMUK!"

Chewie was trying to tell K-2 and Mayv to stop yakking because one of the *actual* creature's mouths had just opened, and another tongue was emerging and seemed to have smelled them and was heading their way. The important thing, though, was that he pointed and both K-2 and Mayv saw what was happening.

"Oh, no!" moaned Mayv. "I hate to run away now, when it seems like we're so close to finding an entrance to the temple!"

"NYRRRRNYRRRR! GRONNNNNNDA MURRRRRG HHHUURRHUURR!" insisted Chewie, with more waving and pointing. If only Mayv spoke Shyriiwook she'd have known that Chewie was trying to say, "Look at the holovid. There's clearly a door built into the statue. We just need to get there and get inside before the worm grabs us again!"

But that was a lot of information to get across with grunts and growls and waving big furry arms around. Mayv and K-2

had no idea what he was saying.

And the more other people don't understand them, the louder Wookiees get.

"GRONNNNDA MURRRRG! GRONNNNDA MURRRRGHHH!"

"The Wookiee has become deranged," said K-2.

"He seems to be worked up about that statue!" said Mayv. "Can you take us there?"

Without saying a word, K-2 turned around and ran back toward the trees.

"RUPPRUG," said Chewie approvingly, and ran after him.

Mayv and Goldie followed Chewie, and unfortunately, the sniffer followed all of them.

K-2 flawlessly retraced his steps, and in a moment they were at the statue, just as he had shown them but much bigger than Mayv had realized. And uglier.

The creature was terrifying to begin with, but whoever had carved the statue had clearly wanted to make it look even scarier and possibly even supernatural.

"This looks like a religious artifact," said Mayv. "Like the people who built it worshipped the creature! So maybe the temple is around here. We just need to find the door in a hurry! Let's split up and look for it."

"NYRRR! RUMK NYRR!" said Chewie. That meant, "No, just hold on for a minute," and he said it with so much authority that Mayv, Goldie, and K-2 all stopped to watch what he did next.

Chewie ran to the base of the statue and pointed out the tall narrow panel that was likely a door.

He pushed, shoved, and pounded at it, but it didn't open. He began wedging his fingers into the crack, trying to pull it open.

Mayv rushed forward to help but couldn't fit the fingers of her exo-glove into the narrow gap.

"Perhaps you should both step back," said K-2 calmly. He slid his narrow fingers into the crack. Servomotors began to whine and then groan as he pulled his long arms in opposite directions.

"MEWOOWYYR!"

Goldie was sounding the alarm. The sniffer had caught up with them.

Chewie turned and roared at it, a roar that would have made almost any creature think twice, but the sniffer didn't even think once. It just sniffed and crept on toward them.

And then there was a mighty crack. The door was open.

"I'll just wait inside, shall I?" asked K-2.

CHAPTER 33



Goldie jumped through the dark doorway first.

“MYROWL!”

If this actually meant something in words, it would mean, “I’ve made a huge mistake! There’s no floor, just a vast empty space! I’ve got to go back!”

Twisting in midair, she tried to reach back and catch her claws on the edge of the doorway. But no, she had jumped too far. She couldn’t reach. She was falling.

And then a big hairy Wookiee arm was scooping her up.

“**RGGHHRRRM!**” said Chewie, lifting her back up to his shoulder.

“*Hrrrrmmmmm,*” hummed Goldie.

The dark doorway lit up as Mayv activated the built-in lights on her exo-glove. She pointed the light down into the void. The beam went a long way before disappearing into green mist.

“I was hoping the mist wouldn’t be as thick inside,” she said. “Of course, I was also hoping there’d be a floor.”

K-2 looked over the edge, turning up the light output from his eyes.

“My sensors indicate that there is a floor down there. Approximately sixty-three point six meters below us.”

“The cable’s that long, right?”

“It is fifty meters.”

“That leaves a long drop,” said Mayv, hesitating. She heard a loud sniff over her shoulder. “But it’s better than being eaten, right? So who goes first?”

"HYARL!" roared Chewie, passing one end of the cable to Mayv while standing protectively between her and the sniffer, which was now just a few meters away, its hook hands wriggling in anticipation.

"Me?" said Mayv, looking down into the green mist. She was terrified, but there was no time to do anything but say *"Oktar grisbit"* and go for it.

She clamped the exo-glove tightly around the cable and let Chewie lower her down into darkness. With a nudge from Chewie, Goldie jumped from his shoulder to Mayv's.

"Thanks for coming," Mayv told the tooka. "I'd pet you but I'm afraid to let go."

"Mrurrrrr," agreed Goldie.



CHAPTER 34



The sniffer just kept coming. That was how it hunted. Not with speed but with stubbornness.

And now it sniffed and knew its prey was within reach.

It didn't know why the prey had stopped running. It knew nothing about the door or the long drop or the girl and tooka that were hanging from a cable. It just knew that something that smelled good was finally close enough to grab.

A hook hand whipped out and wrapped around Chewie's arm.

"GRANNNK," bellowed Chewie, and with strength that could belong only to an enraged Wookiee, he ripped his arm loose.

"WRHHHAAHHHHHHH!"

The pain was incredible. Worse than a blaster bolt. The hook hand had sliced him to the bone.

And in that second, he let the cable slip.

Below, in the darkness, Mayv couldn't see what had happened. But she heard the howl, then felt herself falling. She was still holding on to the cable, but it was falling, too.

She turned her light down to see where she would land. But the floor was still far out of sight.

"YOWWWR!" Goldie yowled, wishing she had stayed with the Wookiee.

And then the cable stopped falling. K-2 had managed to grab it. But Mayv didn't know that, either. When the cable

jerked tight, she was caught off guard and her hand slipped out of the exo-glove.

There was only time for a few sensations. Falling. Hitting. Crumpling. Collapsing. The tooka yowling.

Then her head struck the floor.

CHAPTER 35



K-2 saw the girl disappear into the green and heard her hit bottom.

A quick calculation told him how far she had fallen and how likely it was that a human would survive a fall like that.

There was hope, he decided, but they needed to get down there fast.

"Go," he told Chewie. "I've got the cable."

"RHHUNG," answered Chewie. He pulled a light out of his bag and clipped it to his bandolier, then jumped through the doorway and grabbed on to the rope. The gash in his arm screamed with pain, but there was no time to go easy on it now. He scrambled down the cable into the gloom to find Mayv.

K-2 started to look around for a good place to attach the cable. The sniffer, confused by the sudden lack of proper food, kept sniffing K-2 and tapping at him with its hook hands. But it knew better than to grab anything metal, which would only upset its faraway stomach later.

"You really are annoying," K-2 told it. "I will ask Cassian if we can blast you with a proton torpedo when he gets here. In the meantime, shoo."

The sniffer just kept sniffing.

Once K-2 had the cable tied around part of the base of the statue he stepped through the doorway and descended, somewhat awkwardly since he had to use one arm to pull the antigrav crate down with him and one arm to try to close the remains of the door behind him.

The sniffer butted its “head” against the door a few times, then gave up and slithered away mindlessly to find something else to sniff.

CHAPTER 36



“MURWWWWRRH! MURWRHUH!”

Wookiees don’t have to apologize very often, but when they do it is very sincere.

K-2 found Chewie and Goldie crouched on the ground next to Mayv. The girl wasn’t moving. The mighty Wookiee was petting her head and moaning out his apology over and over. The tooka was mewling piteously. In the cavernous space it all echoed several times, making the whole thing that much more irritating to K-2.

“I brought the crate,” he told the Wookiee.

“RHHUMN GRAA!” snarled Chewie.

“I will overlook your rude behavior,” said K-2, “and remind you that there is a medkit in the crate.”

Chewie leapt up, rummaged in the crate for the medkit, and immediately put it to use on Mayv.

There in that strange underground space, vast and seemingly empty except for green mist and an unpleasant smell, the two giants—one hairy and one metal—leaned over the girl and waited silently for the medkit’s report.

Why was it taking so long? Was it even working? Had the Aloos sent them to that deadly planet without even a working medkit? What could—

And then the medkit’s screen lit up and a green icon appeared. Mayv was alive and not too badly injured.

“NYUURRRUHH!” roared Chewie with relief.

K-2 straightened up and tried to act as if the matter was of no concern to him.

“Perhaps making loud noises is not the best idea since we don’t know—”

“RGGGRHHARRRRGG!”

“Or you could continue making loud noises if you prefer.” Chewie ignored the droid and bent over the medkit to read the tiny screen. Various icons lit up on the medkit, and K-2 interpreted.

“The medkit can help, but she’s going to need some time to recover before she can continue,” he told Chewie. “Maybe an hour or more.”

“HRUMM HRUMMM,” muttered Chewie, fussing over Mayv.

“You will need to use the medkit on yourself first,” said K-2.

“NURRRRHFFF!” Chewie tried to explain that he wanted to help Mayv first.

“You are wrong,” K-2 told him. “You must use the medkit on yourself now. At the rate you are bleeding, you’ll be too weak to complete the mission if you wait. Also, all that blood is making a mess.”

Chewie looked at his arm and saw that K-2 was right. There was a lot of blood and it wasn’t stopping...and he was feeling a bit weak.

K-2 grabbed the medkit and pushed it against Chewie’s arm.

“HHGRRUUPH!” Chewie winced, but he did not resist.

The medkit buzzed and beeped and flashed red warning icons, then squirted a fast-drying adhesive into the gash. It stung like a buzz-bug bite!

Chewie bared his fangs. He hated using medkits. They were typically designed for humans by humans, who couldn’t seem to remember that not every species was as relatively hairless as they were. Now he had a big clump of matted, gloopy hair on his arm.

But the bleeding had stopped. So he grabbed the medkit from K-2 and reset it to get back to work helping Mayv. Then he settled in to wait.

CHAPTER 37



K-2 looked around and quickly discovered that they were in one of many underground rooms. Tunnels led in several directions.

“I’ll go ahead and begin mapping the area,” he told Chewie, who grunted in agreement. What he did not tell Chewie was what he was planning to do if he found the object they were looking for.

Chewie opened a pack of ration sticks and offered some to the tooka. After a meal of delicious glorbs, Goldie turned up her nose at the dry sticks but did take some water. Chewie forced down a couple of the sticks and recalled wistfully his recent meal of fried nerf nuggets.

When Mayv stirred and woke up, he fussed over her like a mother porg would, moving the medkit gingerly from her head to her other injuries and trying to make her comfortable. For his sake, she pretended she was.

She had a few ration sticks, too, while Chewie tried to explain what had happened and, of course, say how sorry he was.

“MURWWWWRRH MURWRHUH!”

“I get it. I get it,” she assured him. “But if you hadn’t saved me several times already, I wouldn’t have even gotten this far.”

When the medkit finally beeped that it was finished, she got up and walked stiffly around the room with Chewie’s light.

She shone it straight up but couldn't even make out the door they had entered through. She could see her exo-glove, still clamped to the end of the cable high above the floor. She shuddered as she realized how far she had fallen.

And then she shuddered again thinking about going back up the cable on the way out.

"Oktar lokwa," she groaned. "I hope there's another exit. Otherwise, it's going to be tough to get back up there."

"MGHHHURRR," agreed Chewie. He'd had more than enough cable climbing and cable pulling for one day. And nobody had really noticed how many times he had rolled, unrolled, and rerolled the cable that day, and it had gotten old fast.

Mayv walked ahead until her light lit up a wall. She was hoping to find something along the lines of a staircase with a safety rail. But the wall was just a wall. Except that it wasn't. The light picked out thousands, probably millions, of thin lines etched into the stone.

At first she couldn't tell what they were; then she realized that the lines formed a work of art like the statue they had seen above ground. A sacred likeness of the awful tongue beast that had come so close to eating her.

She went over to the wall for a closer look. The etched lines showed hundreds of muscular tongues dragging hundreds of humans into hundreds of hungry mouths.

There was something about the way it was drawn that made the whole thing even ghastlier than the already ghastly subject matter. Even though Mayv was getting only glimpses of it, she could tell that the artist had been celebrating the feast...and worshipping the beast.

Now she was sure they were in a temple. A temple built by people who had created a religion around the awful creature and the dark power that oozed out of the chasm.

What sorts of horrors would those people have recorded in a book? Maybe the people had learned how to use the

dark power. Maybe their book held dark secrets that even the Emperor did not know...at least not yet.

Mayv shuddered. This was an awful job in an awful place. But it had to be done, she reminded herself. The *Mola Oktaro* was at stake.

But—for the first time since she had left Oktaro, she wondered—was reclaiming the *Mola Oktaro* really worth *any* price?

She didn't know. So she repainted her triangles in the symbol for wisdom and hoped the answer would come to her.

CHAPTER 38



By the time Mayv finished with her triangles, K-2 was back.

"There is a high probability that I have found what we are looking for," he announced.

"The book? Where is it? Let me see!"

"I did not bring it," said K-2. "I did not know which one to bring. There are many books."

"Like a library?" asked Mayv.

"Yes."

"Well," she said, "I guess that is what I came for."

"I saw something else: animal waste material."

"You mean...?"

"Yes, that. In big piles. Fresh."

"GLUURRPH," croaked Chewie, wrinkling his nose.

"So...there's something big living down here, huh?" Mayv said, sighing. "Well, no sense waiting for it to find us. We better get the book and get out of here as fast as we can."

Chewie got to his feet, stretched his very sore arm, and pulled a spare light from his pouch.

K-2 asked if he still had to carry the crate.

And then, guided by a lying robot, they set off down a tunnel into a temple of fear that was the lair of...well, you'll see.

CHAPTER 39



There were many doors and many rooms. Some big, some small, some with small vents in one wall to let in the green mist directly from the chasm. And all of them with more doors leading to more rooms and so on.

“NROFFFF!”

“If you’re saying you don’t like this, then I agree,” said Mayv, correctly translating Chewie’s mood. “It’s like a maze of little twisty passages. We could get lost forever down here.”

“I cannot get lost,” said K-2. “My navigation system has automatically mapped every room, and I am taking you by the shortest possible route.”

If the mission had been less urgent and the lighting had been better, looking through the rooms would have been fascinating, though disturbing.

The artwork, the artifacts, even the rooms themselves told a dark and dreadful story.

Parts of that story were made clear to our heroes as they wandered the empty temple and saw bits and pieces of its history. But most of it they would never know.

After quite a bit of research, I've learned the rest. Are you ready to hear it?

It won't seem that bad to you, of course. On whatever nice friendly planet you are reading this, you'll be able to view it all as the ancient history of a place you will hopefully never have to visit. But for Mayv and Chewie, the oppressive hatefulness of the place grew and grew with each strange thing they saw. And the fear had to be conquered each time they rounded a corner.

Most of the inhabitants of Ushruu had stayed well away from the creature and the chasm. But some had been drawn to it. Drawn by the dark side itself. But knowing nothing of the Force, the people had assumed the creature was the source of the terrifying power. So they worshipped the creature.

The creature, in turn, gladly ate all who came to worship it.

Finally, one worshipper dodged the snarlers and sniffers long enough to find a cave—an offshoot of the chasm—that let him squeeze into a tight space where the snarlers and sniffers couldn't follow. There he could bask in the green mist and worship the creature without being eaten.

Of course, he was murdered by the next worshipper who came along. And that one by the next. They were, after all, the worst people on the planet. Those who eagerly responded to the dark side.

At last came one who was especially Force-sensitive. She might well have become a Sith, had she known what a Sith was.

She didn't kill the other pilgrims who came after her. She used them. Under her orders, the cave was expanded and

made into a temple—her slaves endlessly chipping away at the rock walls. And as they died off, they were always replaced by new pilgrims—because there were always people who sought power and there was always the dark side to offer it...for a price.

So the temple had grown underground, stretching out along one side of the chasm. And the Enchantress—as she was known—lived an unnaturally long time. Centuries. She learned much about the dark side and recorded it all in a sacred book. She even began to suspect the truth, that the creature was like her—feeding off the dark side, not creating it.

She decided that one day she would share her power and her knowledge with another...an apprentice. She would train that person, let them read the sacred book, let them grow almost as powerful as herself. Almost.

But she hadn't found the right apprentice yet. So while her slaves kept digging, she kept learning.

Eventually, she grew so powerful that the creature became aware of her. It hated her instantly.

For decades it tried to get at her, and finally, it found a weak spot in the temple. A place where the slaves had dug too close to the chasm. The wall was too thin, and a hundred sniffers striking at once cracked it open.

Before the slaves could repair the breach, the sniffers rushed through, not creeping and sniffing but whipping and flailing—powered by a rush of rage and hatred that the creature had never felt before.

Every worshipper died. They didn't run. They didn't fight. They gave themselves to the sniffers and died happy—well, not happy but content.

The Enchantress wasn't about to give herself up. She used her own dark powers to push back the sniffers and get above ground. She fled into the forest, back the same way she had come centuries earlier. Woe to any snarler that got

in her way. They were smashed by a wave of her hand and a blast of hateful power.

But that power ebbed with every step she took away from the chasm.

By the time she reached a settlement, she was weak and impossibly old.

She told the people who found her the story. She told them of her mighty power. She told them of the book. She told them they could use it to destroy the creature. That was all she had left in her heart—a desire to kill the creature that she had once worshipped and now hated.

But the people who heard her story were not like her. They didn't like the fear and would never dream of going near the chasm or the creature. And the idea of killing the creature seemed absurd and unnecessary.

So the Enchantress died, hating those fools almost as much as she had hated the creature, her slaves, and herself.

And sensing her death, the creature returned to its usual hungry half slumber.

And her story became a legend. Told and retold many times—because other than the chasm, the planet was really pretty boring. A powerful sorceress, even a dead one, was big news.

Gradually, the story spread across the planet, and eventually, when space traders discovered the planet, it spread even farther. Losing its power along the way, it was passed on as a fairy tale, an anecdote, an amusement, and finally a rumor.

The Emperor had heard many things, but something in that rumor caught his interest. A forest of fear, where a book of dark power was guarded by a monster with many mouths...Yes...that book would be worth having....

So the Emperor expressed an interest in the book.

And his minions—Janus Greejatus and Sim Aloo—had each hoped to fetch it for him. Greejatus had rushed the job,

sending in a team of Trandoshans whom the snarlers had found delicious.

Sim Aloo had been smarter. Well, actually his daughter had been smarter.

She had thought it through.

The job needed a Wookiee to get through the forest, a librarian to fetch the book, and a cargo droid to carry it (and any other valuables it might find).

She found them and “hired” them, and here we are.

CHAPTER 40



“Have you noticed that a lot of these pictures seem to have the same woman in them?” Mayv asked the others as they passed yet another image scratched into the wall. “And she’s never being eaten by the creature. She’s usually standing on dead bodies. And she seems to be able to shoot flames out of her hands.”

“GRUMLLRRRK RRRUHPTA,” muttered Chewie, comparing the woman in the picture to Han’s last girlfriend. Neither Mayv nor K-2 got the joke, of course.

“Kay-Tu, are you recording these pictures we’re passing?”

“I was actually planning to erase any memory that I had ever seen them.”

“Well, I need you to record them for me. Look at this,” she said, pointing to a string of careful scratches. “This looks like writing of some kind.”

“That is almost as exciting as the tree bugs,” said K-2 flatly.

“Ugh, it’s not supposed to be exciting! It’s supposed to be useful! If there are a lot of books to carry, then I’m going to have to pick the right one. The words on these paintings may be the only clue to what the books say.”

“I thought you did not know this language,” said K-2.

“I don’t. But I may not need to. I read a book about these Old Republic code breakers called the Squill Sifters once. They could crack codes in languages they didn’t know. It’s like a puzzle. And I may only need to figure out a word or two.”

“The chances of figuring out the meaning of a certain combination of unknown letters would be one in four hundred twenty thousand, three hundred seventy-six, even if there were only fourteen letters. This language appears to have at least—”

“UUUUURUNK!” interrupted Chewie, suggesting that the droid just take the pictures quickly so they could get moving. He was getting used to the constant fear, but the smell seemed to get worse and worse.

K-2 wasn't sorry to get moving, either, so he led them on, turning his head now and then to take a holovid of the art.

But his criticism had greatly shaken Mayv's confidence. After all, she wasn't even a real librarian, much less a code breaker.

Chewie, seeming to sense her growing worry, put a friendly hand on her shoulder.

“LLURRRUN RHHHUNGA,” he told her. **“LLURRRRUN RHHHUNGGA.”**

She didn't exactly know what that meant, but really she did: for some reason, the Wookiee believed in her.

They walked on in silence, except for the occasional complaint from Chewie about the smell, which really was getting worse.

Then, as they descended a steep tunnel and stepped out into a long hallway, they found the source of the smell. Or actually, I should say *sources*.

“Here is the fresh animal waste material I observed,” said K-2.

“Yeah, we noticed,” croaked Mayv, trying to bury her nose in her tunic.

“MMMYYYURRRRRRRRRRRRRRG,” lamented Chewie and Goldie, making almost the same sound of disgust and distress.

“I just hope it's from those bugs and not from something worse,” said Mayv. “But judging by the size of it, I'd say we may have big, nasty company down here.”

"HISSSS," added Goldie, who knew exactly what kind of company it was: snarlers.

CHAPTER 41



“Hey, look down there,” said Mayv, wiggling the light to draw their attention to the far end of the hall. “It’s a door. I mean, not just a doorway to another room, but an actual door. We should see what’s behind it.”

“That is the room I am taking you to,” said K-2. “The door was locked previously, but I opened it to see what was inside.”

Mayv shone her light in and knew instantly that it was the library—even though the “books,” as she had predicted, were nothing like any books she had ever seen. Thousands and thousands of flattened rolls were stacked neatly on floor-to-ceiling shelves. One shelf had rotted away, and the books it had held were in a heap on the floor.

Mayv picked one up. The material was several times thicker than paper. And though faded, it had once been blue. She guessed correctly that it was tree bark. Dead and dried for centuries, it no longer gave her the sensation of hope and courage that the living trees did.

She unrolled it a bit and saw words like what she had seen on the walls. Tiny intricate writing scratched into the bark by hand.

“The people on this planet must have never developed any kind of ink,” she said, mostly just thinking out loud. “And no way of printing copies of books, either. Many people must have spent many years creating all of these.”

She unfolded it a little more and saw a picture of a battle. The artist seemed to have delighted in drawing the horrors of war in disgusting detail. Mayv shuddered.

She dropped the roll back on the heap.

"This must have been the history shelf. We need to find the sacred religious books."

She moved about the room, looking at books and comparing them to the holovids of the wall writing that K-2 had sent to her vidscroll.

The others realized this process was going to take a while, and they tried to settle in to wait.

Chewie was hungry and opened another ration stick, but the smell from the tunnel was bad enough to ruin even a Wookiee's appetite, as the old saying goes. He threw the stick aside and groaned with his impatience to get out of that stinking hole in the ground.

Goldie was in full agreement, mewling and pacing back and forth in front of the door.

K-2 at first appeared to be the most patient of the three, but he was the first to interrupt Mayv.

"Are you done yet?"

"No," she answered distractedly. "I've got it narrowed down to these two shelves, but..."

"The reason I ask," said K-2, "is that my sensors are detecting life-forms in the tunnels."

"HYRUNNNH," growled Chewie softly, and crept to the door to listen.

"They're still some distance away," said K-2, "but they appear to be moving in this direction."

"Oktar smugnuk!" growled Mayv. And while I do not normally approve of that sort of language, I think she was justified. When you find out which life-forms were headed toward them, you may feel the same way.

CHAPTER 42



Mayv forced herself to focus. She shone her light on tiny scratchy scribbles and tried to decide what they meant. She felt like she'd found the right shelf, but none of the books seemed like anything special.

Then she stood on her toes to look at the shelf above it. There was only one of the flattened rolls there. Similar in shape but smaller than the others and made out of a different material (tanned sniffer skin, if you must know).

Mayv pulled it down. She folded back the first blank page to look at the text. It was different from the others in some way she couldn't explain.

"At last..."

The voice came from nowhere. Not from the book or from behind a shelf. It was just there.

Mayv heard it in Oktarian. Chewie heard it in Shyriiwook. Goldie even heard a strange yowling that made her bare her teeth and crouch into a fighting stance.

K-2 heard nothing. But they all saw something. A formless redness in the center of the room.

"At last...you've come for my secrets."

"Who are you?" asked Mayv.

"I am class nine Imperial cargo droid Kay-Tuessbee," said K-2.

"I'm not talking to you!"

"Then who are you—"

"Shhh! Just shhh!" hissed Mayv. Then she turned back toward the red light. "Who are you?"

"You must know who I am....You've come for my secrets. For the secrets I learned here on the edge of the great chasm. The secrets that my slaves died for. The secrets that the foolish Vathyr could never understand but which I alone have mastered."

"Well...yes," said Mayv.

"Good, good. I've grown impatient waiting. Once I've passed them on, I can at last let go of this world and join the dark power that flows just on the other side of these stone walls. And then woe to the Vathyr, for I shall poison every one of its thousand mouths!"

"HGGGRUUURRAH!" Whoever was talking, Chewie didn't like it. He just wanted to be away from the dripping evil of that voice.

"If you're saying we should go," said K-2, "I agree. The life-forms are getting closer."

"Are you picking up a life-form in the room with us right now?" asked Mayv.

"No," said K-2, "just you three."

"A life-form...No, that was long ago. I do not live. I only wait. I wait for the right one to give my secrets to."

"Uh...can we have them?" Mayv asked, starting to edge toward the door.

"Wait," cautioned the voice. "Before I give this power away, I must know who will get it. I sense no desire for the power in any of you. Who really wants it? Who has sent you all this way?"

"What do you think, Chewie? Should I tell her?"

"MMMRRRONGGG," said Chewie with a shrug.

"Tell who?" asked K-2.

"I think it's the writer of the book," answered Mayv.

"Ha! The child calls me 'the writer'! To think that a thousand voices once called me 'Enchantress' and now...But no, that doesn't matter. Soon I will be much more. Yes, child, I did write. I wrote the book you hold, the only one here that

really matters. The question I ask is...who shall be the reader?"

"Uh...we think it's for the Emperor. Emperor Palpatine."

"Ah...yes...I believe I have sensed him. His great power, though far away, has of late echoed in the chasm....Yes, he will make good use of my secrets."

The redness grew and filled the room, driving out the green fog. Goldie scampered out the door, and Chewie reached for Mayv to pull her out if necessary.

Then the red light shrank and lit only the book. The writing flared and flickered for just an instant.

And in that instant, the impossible words were clear to Mayv. Words she couldn't read but suddenly understood. They spoke of power and pain and hate, but mostly of fear. Not the feeling of fear but the wielding of fear as a weapon.

Mayv gasped and dropped the book. Chewie reached for it, then jerked his hand back as if he'd been burned.

They were in the presence of such evil, such darkness that they simply could not touch it. They could not complete the mission. They were paralyzed by the horror.

"So this is it then?" asked K-2, bending to pick it up. The compartment where he'd kept his blaster opened, and he stuffed the roll inside. "We should go."

CHAPTER 43



Mayv and Chewie looked at each other. They both felt ill. Repulsed by that one quick glance at the book.

“*URRURRURR!*” groaned Chewie, shaking his head as if he could shake off the memory of the evil they had seen.

“I don’t even know what to do,” said Mayv. “I mean, is it even right to—”

“You two may stay here if you wish,” said K-2. He turned abruptly and ran through the doorway. “I am getting out of here.”

“*MRRRRRAK!*” barked Chewie.

“Wait!” yelled Mayv. “You’re the one who knows how to get back out!”

“Then I suggest you do not fall behind.”

Mayv and Chewie had no choice but to race after him. Goldie ran ahead, but soon she came sprinting back and leapt onto Chewie’s shoulder, hissing and fussing.

K-2 had almost reached the tunnel that would lead them out of the temple when he stopped. His head turned toward the far end of the hall, where a dark hole led to an area he hadn’t mapped.

“Something big is coming.”

“What is it?” asked Mayv, but a snarl answered her question. “*Oktar fresskit...*another snarler!”

But it wasn’t *just* another snarler. As it stepped into the hallway, they saw that it was nearly twice as big as the others. Its neck tentacles even longer. Its fangs more numerous. And unlike the other snarlers, this one had

sinister bony spikes starting on its head and running down its spine.

This was the *queen* snarler.

She wasn't the mother of the smaller snarlers; she was their predator. She didn't lower herself by chasing fallen glorbs around the forest like the other snarlers. She actually *ate* the other snarlers. That kept the pack strong and mean, and she was the strongest and meanest.

Not long before, some weird lizard men (the Trandoshans) had appeared and annoyed her and even hurt her with blasts of fire. They had been tasty. She looked down the tunnel. Would these new creatures taste as good? Not the tall thin one. That one looked like nothing but black bones. But the others looked delicious.

She snarled, and it was a snarl of sweet anticipation. Slobber was already running down her chin. She trotted forward, watching to see which creature would run first.

It was Chewbacca. But he wasn't running away. He was running toward the queen!

"MYARRRRGGHRRRAARRR!" he yelled, warning his friends that they had to hurry before the queen came between them and the tunnel that was their only exit.

They understood. Not the words but the concept. They raced after Chewie and turned to scramble up the steep tunnel while he stayed behind to block the queen snarler.

The queen was surprised by his actions, but instead of pausing to reconsider, she lunged for a quick kill.

Claws out! Tentacles flailing! Fangs bared!

Chewie waited until the last possible moment, then flung himself into the tunnel. The queen got one claw into him, ripping a terrible gash in his leg, but she had failed to capture him.



Her great weight carried her past the tunnel entrance, and her claws scratched the stone floor as she fought to turn herself around.

Chewie and Goldie didn't wait to watch. They were already racing up the tunnel.

But they ran right into Mayv and K-2 coming back down.

"I saw a worm with hook hands," K-2 said, missing his beloved blaster more than ever.

"Sniffer! Blocking the tunnel! Go back!" Mayv was yelling.

"NYARRGA RRHHANK!" Chewie yelled back.

If Mayv didn't understand that, she definitely understood the angry snarl coming from behind him.

There was no going forward and no going back. They were trapped.

CHAPTER 44



Like all the other sniffers, this sniffer was just a brainless tongue of the great creature. It had no particular ill will toward our heroes. It just followed the smell of food all the way down into the maze.

It sensed that the source of the smell was very close, and it sped up—extending its horrible rubbery bulk in a hungry rush.

The queen snarler, however, paused.

Her prey was in easy lunging distance, but there was a sniffer on the other side. You don't get to be queen snarler without learning to avoid a sniffer like Ewoks avoid Gorax. She had no idea it was part of a larger creature, but she knew all about the hook hands and exactly how far they could reach.

So she hunkered into a crouch, ready to spring but content for the moment to wait. Better to share the feast with the sniffer than to risk getting caught.

Our heroes had no time to wait. They needed to act. But what could they do?

K-2 knew what he should do. He should wait, too.

He should let the various living creatures fight things out and try not to get damaged in the fracas. Then when things were finished and the sniffer and snarler had gone off to digest, he could simply walk out of the temple with his mission accomplished.

That's what he knew he *should* do.

Instead, what he did was rush at the queen snarler with the only weapon he had: the crate.

Shoving the open end over the queen's snout, he grabbed on to the tentacles on each side of her head and used his body to hold the crate in place.

The queen had never felt anything like the metal muzzle, and she hated it. She whipped her head from side to side as if snapping the spine of a glorb. K-2 was shaken violently and slammed repeatedly against the tunnel wall.

"Congratulations," he said flatly. "I have saved your lives again."

And he had. Seconds before the hook hands would have ensnared them, Chewie and Mayv were able to flatten themselves against the wall and squeeze past K-2 and the queen. They got smooshed painfully by the flailing snarler a few times, but its attention was on K-2 and the crate.

"Now push the beast toward the other beast," K-2 instructed.

That was a job for a Wookiee! Chewie put his shoulder against the queen's rump and shoved.

"What about you, Kay-Tu?" shouted Mayv. "You'll be trapped!"

But K-2 was already escaping as only a droid could. Just before the writhing sniffer's hook hands reached him, he let go of the crate and dropped to the ground, where he lay flat and motionless. The queen, propelled from behind by Chewie, stomped all over him as she tried to stop herself from getting too close to the sniffer.

She had her massive body half twisted and was on the verge of escaping when the hook hands got her.

SNARLLLLL!

Instantly, she turned all her ferocity on the sniffer, clawing, biting, kicking, scratching. The spikes on her spine ripped horrid gashes in the sniffer, which never felt them. It just wrapped its hook hands around the spikes, the claws, whatever it could grab.

At last, the queen couldn't move at all. By that time, the sniffer was already dragging her up the tunnel and back to

its mouth.

For the first time in its life, the snarler didn't snarl. It whimpered.

"Oktar mishut!" gushed Mayv at K-2. "You really aren't an ordinary cargo droid after all!"

"MRWRRRWON GRUUNK," added Chewie, which was high praise indeed.

"You're welcome," said K-2. "I am sorry that I lost the crate."

"Well," said Mayv, "I'm glad you got it this far or we'd be getting dragged out of here right now by that...Wait a minute! We should be following it! It may take us to an easier way out!"

"MRUP MRUP MRUP," chortled Chewie.

"Yes," said K-2 flatly, "the irony of the situation amuses me also."

CHAPTER 45



The heroes began to chase the sniffer, which retracted briskly through the tunnels. There was a difficult spot where it crossed a large gap in the floor, but it was nothing a Wookiee, a tall droid, and a rogue librarian couldn't handle.

At last their chase took them to a low tunnel with a large crack in the roof. Through the crack they could see the bluish gloaming of the fungus trees, which was a welcome sight.

They scrambled up through the crack in time to see the sniffer retreating through the woods with the queen snarler still squirming in its grasp.

"BRRRAPPP RRRRUNGRMMM!" said Chewbacca...and he meant it!

"Where are we?" asked Mayv.

"My sensors indicate that we are not far from the ship. Less than a klick."

"What do your sensors say about more snarlers?" asked Mayv.

"I'm not picking up any nearby."

"Good, because I have *got* to rest a minute!" She started to sit on the ground, then thought better of it. She leaned against a tree instead and instantly felt more positive. Exhausted but positive.

The droid and the Wookiee seemed to have limitless strength, but hers was tapped out. She considered repainting her triangles in the symbol for energy but realized she was still waiting for the wisdom to kick in. She wasn't sure what to do about the book.

The one thing she knew was that she couldn't stay where she was.

"All right, I'm ready. Should we climb through the trees again?"

"YEEEGARRRGH," said Chewie, rubbing his arm. He had used the medkit only long enough to stop the bleeding and somewhat numb the pain. It was too sore to be much use climbing trees.

"Yeah, I feel the same way," said Mayv, relieved. "Plus we lost our cable and my exo-glove, so Kay-Tu and I would have trouble getting up there anyway. So...should we just run for it and take our chances with the snarlers?"

"Based on my sensor readings," said K-2, "there's an eighty-four percent chance we can make it the first hundred meters without encountering a large life-form."

"Good enough," said Mayv.

K-2 was right. They didn't run into any large life-forms, but—just before they reached the clearing—they ran into some small ones: the rest of the pack of tooka cats.

It was Goldie who spotted them, and her happy yawping alerted the others. Craning their necks they could just see the tookas perched high on a branch bridge, happily chowing down on fresh glorbs.

"Myowr!" Goldie gave Chewie a final nuzzle and an instant later was scrambling up the tree to join the other tookas.

"MWRRRRRUUGH?" asked Chewie, but there was no answer. **"WHHHHUG,"** he moaned, apparently completely forgetting how much he had grumbled about pet sitting when the whole thing had started.

"I think they'll be happier here," said Mayv. "This place must seem like heaven compared to Coruscant. As long as they can dodge the sniffers, they should have a pretty nice life up in the trees."

Mayv stopped to put her hand on a tree.

“I’m going to miss the trees, myself,” she said. “But not the rest of this crazy place!”

“MRRRRRRREGYUPPP GLRRRRRGHH MRRRGYUP,” said Chewie, leaning against a tree and wondering how long it would be before he saw the forests of Kashyyyk or, indeed, any other trees again. ***“RHHHOOOONGR.”***

So it was with a certain wistful feeling that they at last emerged into the clearing to find...a rebel gunship.

Captain Cassian Andor had arrived.

CHAPTER 46



Chewie and Mayv froze and ducked behind a tree.

But K-2 kept running.

The boarding ramp swung open as the droid approached, and a man with a large blaster ran down the ramp to meet him.

“Kay-Tu! You got it?” the scruffy man called in a thick accent.

“Yes, Captain. We have successfully retrieved the data. It is recorded on this.”

As he spoke, the door in his torso whirred open. He pulled out the folded book and handed it to his captain, Cassian Andor, who looked at it doubtfully.

Mayv peeked around the tree just in time to see the scruffy man shove the book inside his scruffy jacket.

“What in Oktar’s name are you doing?” cried Mayv in disbelief.

“MRRRRRAWGGGG!” yelled Chewie, charging forward.

Cassian rather casually swung his blaster rifle around and fired a warning shot that was honestly much closer than a warning shot needed to be.

“No closer,” he said.

But Chewie didn’t stop.

Cassian was in the very act of squeezing the trigger for another shot when K-2 stepped forward to intercept the angry Wookiee. Cassian stopped pulling the trigger but did not take his finger off. With his other hand, he made a signal to the ship’s pilot.

In his still infuriatingly calm voice, K-2 told Chewie, "If you attack, there is an eighty percent chance that Captain Andor will kill you. And if he doesn't, there's a one hundred percent chance that the ship's turret guns will."

Chewie saw the ship's guns turning on him and realized the droid was right. Chewie hadn't lived as long as he had without learning to control his Wookiee rage when necessary.

He stopped, raised his arms in the air, and let out a long, frustrated howling curse, which I won't repeat here.

"That's better," said Cassian. "Don't make me kill you before I decide if I should kill you or not."

"Kay-Tu, why are you doing this?" said Mayv, stepping forward cautiously with her hands raised. "After everything we did to get that book? You're just giving it away?"

"It is important that I give it to Captain Andor," said K-2.

"Why? Why is it more important than my reason for taking it back to Alinka? Or Chewie's reason?"

"I do not know," said K-2. "Captain Andor, why is it important?"

"That's classified information, and these are the Emperor's errand boys," said Cassian. "I think I'll keep that to myself."

"First of all, I'm a girl. Second of all, I don't work for the Emperor!"

"First of all," mocked Cassian, "I don't care, and second of all, yes, you do. And I really can't have you run back to your boss and give him whatever information you did get out of all this."

"Wait, Captain," said K-2. "I've calculated a sixty-four percent chance that these two will be valuable to the Rebellion one day."

"What?" snorted Cassian. "They work for the Empire!"

"Not willingly," insisted Mayv. "We're only doing this because—"

“I don’t care,” interrupted Cassian, waving her away with a waggle of his blaster. “Kay-Tu, that still leaves a good chance that they’ll continue working for the Empire. I can’t take that risk.”

“Actually,” said K-2, “I calculate zero chance that they will work for the Empire again. The remaining thirty-six percent is the likelihood that they will be killed before they can be useful to the Rebellion.”

“Okay, fine,” sighed Cassian. “I’ll let them live, but I’m not giving them a free ride. You’re on your own, kid...and, uh, Wookiee person.”

He backed up the ramp, keeping his blaster trained on Chewie.

K-2 turned to look at Mayv.

“Moving away from the ship in a hurry will increase your survival chances considerably.” Then he turned and followed his captain.

Mayv and Chewie looked at each other in disbelief as a blast door slammed shut behind K-2. How could they possibly get the book back?

Then, suddenly, Mayv understood what K-2’s final words meant.

“Run!” she yelled as the rebel ship’s engines roared to life. She and Chewie got clear just before blue plasma shot out of the thrusters, scorching the ground and lifting the gunship into the air.

CHAPTER 47



“MYURRGGGGGHHHH NYARGGGGGGG

RRRRRRRRRRUGRUG! Chewie yelled at the ship as it disappeared.

He had a lot more to say on the subject, but Mayv had to interrupt him.

“Look, more snarlers!” she yelled, pointing across the clearing where three of the brutes had emerged from the trees, sniffing and snarling.

“MAHRRRR YARRRRRRRGH!” Chewie roared. In his rage he was ready to take them on barehanded.

“No, Chewie! We can make it back to our ship!”

“NYURF!” he reluctantly agreed, and followed as Mayv sprinted toward their little cargo ship.

But as they reached the ship’s hatch, her steps faltered.

“Oh, no! I forgot....The ship’s full of snarlers! That droid locked them in....”

Even through the thick hull of the ship, they could hear the snarlers inside clawing wildly at the walls, desperate to escape.

And then came a snarling behind them. *Those* snarlers were desperate to eat.

“Oktar Jarvunk! What are we going to—”

“MGHHROWRRR!”

Chewie was already climbing up the side of the ship. She couldn’t understand that he was telling her about another way in, but by then she trusted him completely.

Turning her back on the approaching snarlers, she followed him up.

By the time she reached the top of the ship, the snarlers were leaping up to snap at her legs. With huge relief, she saw that Chewie was holding a cockpit access hatch open for her.

She slipped through, Chewie slammed the hatch shut, and the outside snarlers were no longer a problem.

Unfortunately, every other problem was still a problem.

The cargo hold was full of snarlers and the prize that would have freed Han and secured the *Mola Oktaro* was gone.

CHAPTER 48



Mayv collapsed into the copilot's chair. Chewie was already in the captain's seat, grumbling and fussing, directing furious rants at the droid who was no longer there to hear them and wouldn't have understood them even if he were.

"In a way, I'm glad," said Mayv.

"HRUHHHH?" said Chewie, completely flummoxed by that absurd statement.

"What I mean," said Mayv, "is that now that it's out of our hands and we can't get it back, I'm glad the book is not going to the Emperor. Who knows what the Empire might have learned from it? How to be worse than they are already, probably."

Chewie cocked his head to one side and thought that over. He certainly didn't want the Empire to gain any new power. But he also wanted to get Han back.

"MYUURRGRRPH..." he said, and Mayv understood.

"Yeah, well, that's the bad part of this. Instead of getting what Alinka sent us for, all we've got is a cargo hold full of insane snarlers!"

Chewie cocked his head again.

"BRRRNGGUPH RRUUNRUNN!" he announced excitedly.

"BRRRNGUPHH! MHURR MHYUGHHH!"

Chewie spun around to the controls and started flipping switches and twisting dials.

"What? What are you doing?"

Chewie spun back.

"BRNNNNNGGUPH RRUNNNRUUN!" he repeated, making wild gestures with his arms and looking very satisfied with

himself.

“What? You’ve got a plan? What is it?”

“MHURR BRNNNNGGGUPPHRR,” he roared as he fired the ship’s thrusters.

The ship lurched into the air, and Mayv nearly bounced out of her seat. Then as Chewie slammed the throttle forward and the main engines kicked in, she was pushed back down by the acceleration.

“I hope it’s a good plan,” she croaked.

“RRGHHAWRRRRRRRRRRRR!”

CHAPTER 49



Han was bored.

For a few hours he had amused himself with escape plans.

Plans where he got out with the credits.

Plans where he got out with the credits and a few priceless objects.

Plans where he just got out.

But he had rejected them all. And he had known he was going to reject them all.

There were simply too many thugs with blasters. That was the one thing he hated most about the smuggling business: thugs with blasters. All the other stuff could be dealt with, but at a certain point, too many thugs with too many blasters was going to be a problem. Sometimes the thugs were just thugs, sometimes they were stormtroopers, and sometimes Han himself ended up playing the role of thug with blaster.

But he didn't like that.

Han liked a job with a little more glory to it. A little daring, a lot of luck, and maybe a big surprise that would catch the thugs off guard.

Yes, that was his kind of plan.

And Chewie's, too.

CHAPTER 50



“Finally!” said Alinka Aloo when a screen blinked the message that the cargo ship was swooping in for a landing.

She got up and started for the doors that opened onto the landing pad.

“Uh-uh, not you,” she said to Han, pushing him back in his seat. And then to her thugs: “You, you, and you, keep your blasters on him. The rest of you, come with me.”

She pressed a switch, and the big doors slid open. She stepped out onto the landing pad, flanked by thugs with guns on each side.

The ship landed.

The cargo door clanked open.

And chaos was unleashed.

The snarlers, cooped up in the cargo hold for hours, were hungrier and angrier than they’d ever been.

They lunged for the thugs. The thugs, caught off guard, fired wildly as they tried to lunge for the nearest escape route.

Alinka Aloo began shouting orders, which got the attention of several snarlers but none of her thugs.

For a split second, Han thought, *Oh, no, not more of those blasted hounds like Rebolt had on Corellia!* Then he realized what was going on, grabbed the blaster from the nearest open-mouthed, off-guard guard, and used it as needed. Even before the third guard hit the ground, Han was scooping up the credits and one of the Junarian vases.

“THURGGHA BRRRUG!” Chewie was yelling at him across the chaotic scene.

“WHAT?”

“THURGGHA BRRUG!”

“The book? What book? Oh, that book.”

Han grabbed the little book that Alinka had been waving about earlier, then headed for the ship’s cargo hold door.

He passed Alinka, who was running the other way, pursued by a snarler.

“YOU—” she began, but Han didn’t hang around to hear the rest of the insult.

He ducked some blaster shots, squeezed between a couple of snarlers that were busy chewing on thugs, and jumped through the cargo hold door, which was already closing.

He and Chewie looked at each other for a second.

“What is that smell?” Han asked. He looked down to see that he had landed in something squishy and awful.

“BROOONAUGHHH RRUUG RRRUD!” As you probably can guess, that loosely translates to “That’s what you get for sending me on a pet-sitting job.”

Chewie was still laughing long after he’d run back to the cockpit and blasted off.

CHAPTER 51



Chewie landed the little ship in the corner of the docking bay where they'd left the *Millennium Falcon*.

There was no time to lose. They had to take off before Alinka Aloo could fight off the snarlers, guess where they were headed, and alert the authorities.

They were too late, of course. The authorities had been alerted and told to blast the *Millennium Falcon* out of the sky. So Chewie and Han had to outmaneuver a few dozen TIE fighters before the *Falcon* could make the jump to lightspeed. But of course, that's what Chewie and Han were best at.

With a whoop, Han pulled the lever, and the *Falcon* blasted away from Coruscant and into hyperspace.

"MRRURUURRRRR," trilled Chewie, glad to be done with that cruddy cargo ship and back on the best ship in the galaxy.

"Wait," said Han, looking at the navicomputer. "*Where* are we going?"

"HRRROMBBBBRR!"

"Taking who home?" Han asked in disbelief. "The kid?" Han turned in his seat to take another look at her.

Mayv had ignored the whole TIE fighter chase and was busy reading a book. Han rolled his eyes.

But of course, we know it wasn't just a book. It was *the* book she had risked everything for, the *Mola Oktaro*. It was an honor just to hold it. A sacred experience to read it. And

Mayv would be the one to return it to her people. She had repainted her triangles in a pattern she had never worn before: a triangle made of triangles. Hope.

“Hey, kid, where you going?”

“Home,” she said. “To Oktaro.”

“Whew...” whistled Han. “That’s a long way. That’s gonna cost you at least—”

“GRRRRHOMMMM!”

“All right, pal, all right....Looks like it’s a free ride this time, kid.”

“Thanks, Chewie,” said Mayv, and she put the book down long enough to jump up and throw her arms around the Wookiee and plant a kiss on his big hairy head.

“WRRWRRRAA HHWURGHRWHRG!” said Chewie.

And I’m sure you know what that means.

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Andie Tong has worked on franchises such as The Zodiac Legacy with Stan Lee, Tron: Betrayal, Spectacular Spider-Man UK, The Batman Strikes, Tekken, Plants vs. Zombies, and Masters of the Universe, for companies such as Disney, Marvel, DC Comics, Panini, Dark Horse, and Titan Publishing. Andie has also worked on a range of children's illustrated storybooks for HarperCollins, as well as commercial illustrations. Malaysian born, Andie migrated to Australia at a young age. He currently resides in Singapore with his wife and children.